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To my Mother and Father

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PREFACE

Any ecumenical study is based on two presuppositions. The first is that there is a common faith in one Lord that unites all Christians despite all differences in doctrine and Church order. The second is a matter of openness or readiness to learn more about our common faith or to be reminded perhaps of forgotten or unappreciated aspects to our Christian heritage. In this way the barriers of division are diminished.

In the course of the preparation of this dissertation there was a significant ecumenical publication of John Wesley's famous "Letter to a Roman Catholic." This new edition of Wesley's "Letter" appeared under the joint imprint of Methodist and Roman Catholic publishers with prefaces by bishops of both Churches. The Methodist Bishop, Odd Hagen, points out that the aim of Wesley's "Letter" is "in process of fulfillment":

that Methodists and Roman Catholics, even though they cannot yet 'think alike in all things', have begun to 'love alike', to practise towards each other the 'religion of love'. This consummation, which John Wesley so devoutly wished but which circumstances on both sides so long delayed, is now by God's grace at hand.
(Michael Hurley, ed., John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic, p. 11-2)

In his "Letter" John Wesley exhorts us to dialogue: "Come, my brother, and let us reason together." This present study is undertaken as a response to this invitation. Some

general observations on the contemporary interest in Christian anthropology will serve as an introduction. The first part of this dissertation will treat of Wesley's influence on American Christianity and the ecumenical dimensions of his thought. The second part will concentrate on Wesley's doctrine of man and, specifically, on his notion of prevenient grace. A parallel consideration of Karl Rahner's ~~concept~~ of the supernatural existential will follow with a view to establishing whether and to what degree there is agreement between the two theologies. The results will then be formulated in the conclusions.

For the sake of uniformity throughout this thesis the chief primary source for Wesley's writings will be The Works of John Wesley, published by the Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan in fourteen volumes. These volumes are reproduced complete and unabridged by photo offset from the authorized edition of The Works of John Wesley published by the Wesleyan Conference in London in 1872. They will be cited as "Works." In addition, wherever necessary, use will be made of John Telford's edition of The Letters of John Wesley (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), in eight volumes. They will be cited as "Letters."

Finally, at the outset of this dissertation I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to the director of this dissertation, Rev. Carl J. Peter, to Mr. Roland Kircher, Librarian at Wesley Theological Seminary, together with his

library staff for their interest in this study and their excellent service in providing source materials, and to Rev. John E. Bresnahan, O.S.A., Librarian at Augustinian College, for his encouragement and unfailing cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY INTEREST IN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

For a Christian no 'a priori' definition of man is ultimately satisfying. At the heart of his faith is the mystery of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who not only reveals God to man but also (precisely by revealing God) reveals man to man. In the first chapter of the Bible man is called the image of God. Not until the coming of Christ, however, do we really understand the depth of meaning in this Biblical description of man, for "He is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation."¹

If this is human nature, we begin to understand more clearly -- always of course within the framework of the basic mystery which is God and we -- what it means to say: God takes on a human nature as his own. The indefinable nature, whose limits -- 'definition' -- are the unlimited reference to the infinite fullness of the mystery, has, when assumed by God as his reality, simply arrived at the point to which it always strives by virtue of its essence. It is its meaning, . . . to be that which is delivered up and abandoned, to be that which fulfills itself by perpetually disappearing into the incomprehensible. This is done in the strictest sense and reaches an unsurpassable pitch of achievement, when the nature which surrenders itself to the mystery of fullness belongs so little to itself that it becomes the nature of God himself. The incarnation of God is therefore the unique, supreme, case of the total actualization of human reality, which consists of the fact that man is in so far as he gives up himself.²

¹Colossians 1:15

²Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," Theological Investigations, IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 109-10.

The development of a complete Christian anthropology is one of the major theological tasks of our time. The reasons for the centrality of the anthropological issue in contemporary theology are many and diverse. Not only have developments within the field of theology itself brought the anthropological question into focus, but also the current world situation in general has posed the question of man and his meaning in particularly acute forms.

Within the pale of theology the great advances in Biblical studies have brought to light the unique insights of the Hebraic view of man. Differences between this Hebrew anthropology and the (quite influential in the history of theology) Hellenistic concept of man have been underscored (and celebrated!) by recent theologians almost to the point of overstatement. Granted the attractive and appealing nature of Hebrew thought, balance must now be restored to our enthusiastic rediscovery of the Semitic background of the Christian tradition:

We must remark, first of all, comparing Hebrew and Greek categories of thought, that a monolithic opposition must be avoided. In fact, the two types of thought have influenced each other, and it would be wrong to say that everything that is Greek is "improper," strange, unauthentic reality in comparison with the Hebrew substratum, which alone would be authentic.³

With this caution in mind, the differences between the two "mentalities" can be seen in perspective. Perhaps the basic difference

³Charles Moeller, "Renewal of the Doctrine of Man," Renewal of Religious Structures ("Theology of Renewal," Vol. II; "Proceedings of the Congress on the Theology of the Renewal of the Church," Centenary of Canada, 1867-1967) (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968) pp. 447-8.

between Greek and Semitic thought is that the former views reality analytically and dualistically, while the latter sees things synthetically and as a whole.⁴ This distinction is quite obvious in comparing the two anthropologies. In Hebrew, basar (flesh) means the whole man from the viewpoint of his frailty as a creature, but also in his solidarity with the whole of mankind.⁵ Nefes (soul) again designates the whole man with emphasis on the fact that he is a living person.⁶ The term, Ruah (spirit) adds a new dimension, the God-ward, signifying "the divine power which makes men just and bestows life on them."⁷

These three Semitic terms always refer to the whole man, not to a "higher" or "lower" part: basar and nefes stress the human condition in its weakness and its strength, while ruah points to the divine in man, his "supernatural" dimension. The anthropology of the New Testament follows that of the Old. St. Paul in particular is famous for his contrasts between "flesh" (the sinful, unredeemed man) and "spirit" (the graced, redeemed man); but here again Paul is speaking of the whole man:

⁴This rather simplistic distinction is merely intended to afford us useful labels for the comparison of the two "mentalities" which follows.

⁵cf. J. A. T. Robinson, The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology ("Studies in Biblical Theology No. 5") (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1952, reprint 1963) p. 15.

⁶cf. Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. I (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 153.

⁷Louis F. Hartman (trans.), Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1963), p. 2298.

'Flesh' for St. Paul is not a part of man, but the whole man, in his spiritual dimensions too, in so far as for lack of the holy Pneuma and of grace he is subject to sin and to God's wrath. Only an interpretation which had not yet completely eliminated Gnostic or Neoplatonist tendencies with their 'a priori' categories (and this is definitely the case with St. Augustine) could have explained St. Paul's purely religious concepts in the sense of a philosophy for which the ontologically less perfect is also 'eo ipso' what is religiously further removed from God and the spirit is always something more divine, in such a way that the opposition of the flesh to God and to the law of the holy pneuma (which is not just 'spirit' as meant by a philosophical anthropology) is transposed into an opposition of man's sensibility (in the metaphysical sense) to his intellectuality.⁸

The categories of Hellenistic anthropology, on the other hand, are analytical and abstract. The distinctions of "matter" and "spirit" refer respectively to the body, the "lower," and the soul, the "higher" principles in man. Preference is always accorded the soul or the spiritual principle, because it is higher in the order of being. This tendency received its classical form in Plato who identified man with his soul.

The history of Christian theology bears witness to the dangers involved in simply translating Semitic thought forms into their seemingly cognate Greek categories. Augustine's theology, as Rahner points out, suffers from this transposition. St. Thomas later corrected this tendency in his affirmation of the basic unity of man in terms of the soul as the actuality of the body. However, Thomas remains within the framework of Greek concepts,⁹ and it is not until the renewal

⁸Karl Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," Theological Investigations, I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), pp.354-7.

⁹cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, "Super Epistolam S. Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas," In Omnes S. Pauli Apostoli Epistolas Commentaria, Vol. I (Turin: Marietti, 1891), p. 589. St. Thomas comments on chapter 5, verse 17.

in Biblical studies in modern times that Roman Catholic theology has benefited from a deeper understanding of the Semitic mentality. Needless to say, the direct, concrete, existential character of Hebrew thought has been enthusiastically received by a connatural climate in contemporary culture.

The apologetical task of theology today is another factor in the centrality of anthropological concerns. No longer can theologians presume that everyone knows the meaning of the word, God. In this secular age the word, God, is not a universally intelligible starting point for dialogue. This fact leads John Macquarrie to answer the question, "how is theology possible?" by beginning with a study of man:

If we can begin from the humanity which we all share, and if we find that this humanity points beyond itself for its completion, then we have, so to speak, indicated the place of the word, "God," on the map of meaningful discourse.¹⁰

To go further -- to state the case for the Christian faith -- will demand an investigation of the "signs" whereby Christian revelation is perceived as "credendum." This investigation, however, cannot be pursued with an attempt to be "coldly objective." As Berdyaev puts it:

If we are to look at the relation between truth and revelation philosophically, it can only be done by a philosophy which is inwardly based upon religious and spiritual experience, not by a rationalist philosophy but by an existential philosophy which recognizes that spiritual experience is primary.¹¹

¹⁰John Macquarrie, Studies in Christian Existentialism (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), p.5.

¹¹Nicolas Berdyaev, Truth and Revelation (New York: Collier Books, 1962) p. 8.

This existential approach is followed by Henri Bouillard in answer to the problem of understanding the "signs" of revelation:

First, we may remark that the signs would have no meaning for anyone if the mystery they were supposed to make known had no intrinsic relation to human existence. But, as it happens, their purpose is to impress on us that communion with God is our supernatural end, and this, according to patristic and medieval tradition, revived in our own day, is the object of an immanent human desire. This means that Christ and the Church offer us communion with the living God as the answer to the question of the meaning of human existence. We can, indeed, read God's revelation in the signs to the precise extent of our capacity to read in them also the revelation of the meaning of human existence.¹²

Shubert Ogden, another theologian who has written on the contemporary problem of God and faith, uses the "anthropological" approach in maintaining that "the only way any conception of God can be made more than a mere idea having nothing to do with reality is to exhibit it as the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share."¹³ In this line of thought the acceptance of an ultimate meaning in human life is an act of "implicit faith" in God:

. . . we must obviously take the further step of seeing the essential connection between the reality of our existential faith in the worth of life and what is properly meant by the word, "God." . . . I hold that the primary use or function of "God" is to refer to the objective ground of reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence.¹⁴

¹²The Logic of the Faith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 18-9 (*italics mine*).

¹³The Reality of God (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 20 (*italics mine*).

¹⁴Ibid., p. 37.

In his book, The God Question and Modern Man, Hans Urs von Balthasar traces the historical development of our contemporary "anthropological age." Nature has been secularized, or better, perhaps "de-divinized." It has lost its sacredness; it exists to be manipulated by man. Science and technology are proving that the world is just that-- the world -- and not God. While the world thus loses its numinous character, this "profanization" of nature is really serving as a boon to theology, which now has the unique opportunity to "re-locate" the truly Numinous -- to further clarify the strictly religious sense of mystery.¹⁵ At the same time man has come to a new understanding of himself in his environment. He has come to accept the totality of his existence as a "being-in-the-world." As Schillebeeckx has observed:

For the first time in history since the Hellenistic period, we are confronted with a complete break with the dualist conception of man. A synthesis between the consistent acceptance of personalism and the recognition of the essential incarnation of the human person is gradually coming about.¹⁶

Philosophy has moved from a cosmologically oriented metaphysics to a new anthropological ontology. Von Balthasar describes "the way to anthropology" by employing the three stages of August Comte without, of course, accepting Comte's superficial interpretations.¹⁷ Man has come to see himself as the locus for understanding being, the perennial quest of philosophy:

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," Theological Investigations, IV, p. 36ff.

¹⁶ E. Schillebeeckx, Revelation and Theology, II (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 122.

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, The God Question and Modern Man (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), p. 12.

So far we have been concerned with a philosophy of abstract being as such and of the world as a whole, in which man was, indeed, a privileged being, yet only a part of it, "some portion of thy creation" as St. Augustine writes emphatically at the beginning of his Confessions. Now this has been changed into a philosophy of that being which, both concrete and universal, is the idea of the world, hence the locus where being as such is understood and realized.¹⁸

Again, in the words of Schillebeeckx:

Probably the most important advance made by the philosophy of modern phenomenology is its recognition of the distinctive character of the "human condition" and its resolute abandonment of physicism, according to which man, like the things of nature, was seen as something that is "determined by nature."¹⁹

If Anthropology has thus become the locus for philosophical investigation, theology too is becoming aware of the potential of the anthropological approach for its own methodology. Denying on the one hand the modernistic thesis that faith evolves from man's understanding of self and of being, Karl Rahner at the same time has labored to bring out a mutual inner relationship between human self-understanding (man's ability to receive salvation) and its correlative reality of revelation:

This is in a special way the task of contemporary theology. In this sense we are looking toward anthropology as the locus of theology . . .

¹⁸Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁹op. cit., p. 121.

If man is, as a result of his transcendence, a nature always "eccentric" towards God, and is as a result the possible being-other of God (christologically and anthropologically understood as formally two aspects of the same reality), then the comprehensive locus of all theology is anthropology. Such a thesis does not deny the theocentricity of theology, according to which God is the formal object of every theology of revelation, because no theology can, in its teaching about God, avoid saying something at the same time about man, and vice versa.²⁰

Rahner has proven the fruitfulness of his "transcendental-anthropological" method. He has employed this method in his writings on all theological topics to bring out concretely his thesis that "speech about God and speech about man are connected, not only from the point of view of content, but from the point of view of knowledge itself."²¹

Outside the pale of properly theological concerns other factors are forcing the anthropological issue to the fore. In the past man's making of his world was quite limited in its extent. Uncontrollable nature was always the large backdrop restricting man's potential to develop as human a world as possible. Today, however, because of the successes of science and technology, all this has changed. The world is now regarded as the human project of a liberated homo faber. And with this new view of a world both hominized and still indefinitely hominizable a new human self-consciousness emerges. Secularized man has been born!

²⁰Karl Rahner, "Grundsätzliche Überlegungen zur Anthropologie im Rahmen der Theologie," Mysterium Salutis ("Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus," Vol. II) (Zurich, 1967) p. 406.

²¹Karl Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," The Word in History (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), pp. 1-2.

Contemporary theologians see this phenomenon of secularization as both an opportunity and a challenge for Christian faith. Johannes Metz, for example, seizes this opportunity for a deeper penetration of the central biblical proclamation: Verbum caro factum est:

For it was not the world itself that was divinized in the incarnation of the eternal Word; God's definitive turning-toward the world occurred in man. He and he alone is the locus of God's irrevocable acceptance of the world and its history. It is in man that God's relation to world and history is mediated and perfected. World and history are divinized only by being hominized. Verbum homo factum est.²²

Metz points out that it is perhaps only in a hominized world that we can come to fully realize the significance of the central Christian belief that God is encountered in our brother man. A hominized world, however, as Metz cautions, is not "eo ipso a humanized world":

The hominized world appears to be a dehumanized world. And this is probably the greatest danger of our situation: not only the world of nature, but even man himself is increasingly in danger of being "manipulated." He is not only the subject activating the hominizing process; he also runs the constant risk of being degraded into the object subjugated and systematized by planning and experimentation.²³

Here then is the present challenge to the Christian concept of man: will the work of hominizing the world be abandoned to the new ideologies, or will we come in faith to "experience God as the precarious and unmanageable future of human freedom operative in the

²²Johannes Metz, "The Future of Belief in a Hominized World," Toward a Theology of Christian Faith ("Readings in Theology: Canisianum Series," Vol. V) (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1968), p. 310.

²³Ibid., p. 317

world, and, finally as the God who chooses to reveal his closeness in the encounter with our brother."²⁴

It is in this context of interest and concern that this study on "The Christian Anthropology of John Wesley" seeks to make a positive, though modest, contribution.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 319-20.

CHAPTER I

THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN WESLEY ON AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

In the autumn, 1965, issue of Religion in Life Dr. C. C. Goen published an article entitled "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History." Toward ascertaining the significance of this label Dr. Goen avers that "the term . . . attempts to describe a distinct expression of Christianity that became widespread in the century under review."¹ The "century under review" was the era following the Great Awakening of the 1740's. In his article Dr. Goen describes the distinctive features of this "Methodism":

The central features of this "Methodism" may be summarized as follows: (1) an intense religious experience consisting of deep distress over sin, a voluntary personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior, and an assurance of having been "born anew"; (2) churches composed of the regenerate only, in more or less self-conscious antagonism to the "world"; and (3) an ethic whose focus of concern was progressively narrowed until it came to be expressed solely in terms of individual piety.²

The author leaves it to "professional Methodists to argue how far John Wesley would own this as authentic Methodism." Not being a professional Methodist, I cite the above passage with no intention to attempt to answer this problem. My more modest concern is merely to

¹C. C. Goen, "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History," Religion in Life, Autumn, 1965 (Vol. XXXIV, No. 4) 563.

²Ibid., 563.

point out from this label, "The Methodist Age," the fact that the religious movement initiated by John Wesley has had considerable influence on the form of American Christianity. The fact that the religion of the greater part of nineteenth century America was strongly influenced by "Methodism" or "Arminianism"³ is corroborated by several other scholars cited by Dr. Goen.

Granted the preponderant influence of Protestantism (in this case, Methodism) on the American ethos in formation, it seems obvious that American Catholicism for the sake of its own self-understanding must come to grips with its relationship to "Protestant America." Martin Marty agrees with Jesuit scholar Walter Ong in the latter's attempt to interest fellow Catholic intellectuals in this project:

If Ong is right, twentieth century Catholicism, to find itself, will have to learn to deal with nineteenth century Protestantism. It will have to explore its own career in the "predominantly anti-Catholic, although, in the large, curiously benign, Protestant culture of the United States in which it was making its home," and relate itself to the ideas behind the American experience.⁴

In the case of American Methodism any real understanding of this movement must begin abroad -- with the story of the eighteenth century English evangelist, John Wesley:

³Arminianism was a religious system, originating in the sixteenth century with the Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius. It was a departure from rigid Calvinism in its denial of absolute predestination and in its admission of the concurrence of free will and grace. Cf. New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. I, p. 839.

⁴Martin Marty, The New Shape of American Religion (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 57.

. . . the roots of Methodism as the world everywhere knows it today are reverently grounded in the Wesleyan movement in Britain and the life and work primarily of John Wesley.⁵

THE CAREER OF JOHN WESLEY

The life of John Wesley spans almost the whole of the eighteenth century. Born on June 17, 1703 he died on March 2, 1791. He was the fifteenth of the nineteen children borne by Susannah to the Reverend Samuel Wesley, rector of the Anglican parish of Epworth in Lincolnshire. Samuel Wesley was a devoted pastor deeply committed to the best in the Anglican tradition. Susannah was a remarkably intelligent woman of strict piety. She was most systematic in everything she did -- including childrearing. Her son John was to imitate her throughout his life in his dedication to system and order.

John was educated at Charterhouse School in London and later at Oxford. His brother Charles joined him at school and became his constant life companion. Finishing their studies, the brothers were ordained priests in the Church of England. In 1729 John became a fellow and tutor at Oxford.

It was at Oxford that the Methodist movement began. John took over the leadership of the "Holy Club" founded by his brother. This club was first of all a disciplined student group, devoted to the study of the Bible, discussion of the faith, mutual confession and support, and works of charity among the paupers of Oxford's streets and the prisoners of its jails. The Wesleys and their

⁵David C. Shipley, "The European Heritage," The History of American Methodism, Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 11.

"Holy Club" were called by jeering students "the Methodists" because of their regularity in study, prayer, and service.

Wesley has left us several accounts of his religious state during his Oxford years. Particularly interesting are his recollections of his first "conversion":

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying. In reading several parts of this book I was exceedingly affected, by that part in particular which related to "purity of intention." Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts and words and actions, being thoroughly convinced that there was no medium, but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or to myself; that is, in effect, to the devil . . .

In the year 1726 I met with Kempis's Christian's Pattern. The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than it ever had done before. I saw that even giving all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this and go no further) would profit me nothing unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to him. I saw that "simplicity of intention and purity of affection," one design in all we speak or do and one desire ruling all our tempers, are, indeed, "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God. A year or two after, Mr. Law's Christian Perfection and Serious Call were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian, and I determined, through his grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of) to be all-devoted to God; to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance.⁶

The reading of these three spiritual authors, Taylor, a Kempis, and law had an impact on the young Wesley that was life-long in its duration.⁷ From them Wesley came to see the seriousness, the "all or

⁶Works, XI, 366-7.

⁷cf. William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1946) p. 240.

nothing" character of religion. In these years of his life at Oxford we witness the early development of perhaps the most distinctive trait of Wesleyan theology -- the emphasis on striving for Christian perfection. Not too long afterwards Wesley set forth in his sermon entitled, "The Circumcision of the Heart," preached on January 1, 1733, what he believed regarding Christian perfection; and as late as 1777 he was to write that this sermon, the first of his writings to be published, expressed "without any material addition or diminution" all that he believed in regard to perfection.⁸

In the company of his confreres Wesley began the study of the ancient Church and in particular of the Eastern Fathers. Again, this investigation of patristic literature contributed significantly to his own theology of Christian perfection. In particular, Clement of Alexandria's conception of the "Christian Gnostic" provided Wesley with an exemplar of the perfect Christian.

In the summer of 1735 came the invitation which brought "Methodism" into its first contact with America. For Wesley this American interlude was to prove a total disaster. Charles Wesley accompanied his brother to Georgia to serve as Secretary to General Oglethorpe while John filled the office of pastor at Savannah. Both brothers were failures in their new posts: Charles showed himself to be a poor secretary; John had little or no success in his ministry to both settlers and Indians. A ridiculous love affair followed by a disgraceful court trial forced John to return to England in less than two years.

⁸cf. Works, XI, 366-7.

While the Georgia mission as a mission was unsuccessful, various experiences connected with this journey proved to be invaluable for the development of Wesley's theological thought. Particularly significant for the anthropological concerns of this present study is the change that took place in Wesley's regard for the Indians. At first (before his trip to America) he spoke in terms of the "noble savage" of Rousseau, a creature unspoiled by civilization:

I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen. They have no comments to construe away the text; no vain philosophy to corrupt it; no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounders to soften its unpleasing truths, to reconcile earthly mindedness and faith, the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. They have no party, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the gospel in simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God.⁹

Experience taught Wesley differently. Perhaps for the first time he came to a deeply personal understanding of the meaning of the universality of original sin.¹⁰ Commenting on the failure of his evangelical efforts among the Indians, he writes:

They know not what friendship or gratitude means; they show no inclination to learn anything, but least of all Christianity; being full as opinionated of their own parts and wisdom, as either modern Chinese or ancient Romans.¹¹

The Georgia experience was also the occasion for another important influence on the future of Wesley's thought, his acquaintance

⁹Letters, I, 188.

¹⁰cf. William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1946), p. 72.

¹¹Works, I, 68.

with the Moravians. These German Pietists taught Wesley that religion should be experienced in fearlessness and joyfulness.¹² The Moravian Bishop Spangenburg convinced Wesley that the belief that Christ died for the world, one's self included, was not enough. One must have a personal assurance of Christ's salvific work for one's own self.¹³ This doctrine of "personal assurance" was to become an important part of Wesleyan theology.¹⁴

Arriving home in England in 1738, Wesley was sadly disillusioned about his own faith commitment. He had striven for perfection for over a decade, and all his work seemed for naught. He continued in this depressed state of soul for several months until the famous event of May 24, 1738 -- the Aldersgate experience. Wesley describes his own "Damascus road":

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁵

While authors disagree in estimating the significance of the Aldersgate experience on Wesley's spiritual and theological development,¹⁶

¹²Works, I, 22.

¹³Ibid., 23.

¹⁴cf. Cannon, op. cit., p. 215.

¹⁵Works, I, 103.

¹⁶cf. Piette, John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism, pp. 305-12; Albert Outler, John Wesley, p. 14; William R. Cannon, op. cit., pp. 66-9.

most would agree in viewing this event as at least the most dramatic in a series of similar "conversion experiences." It is true to say that 1738 was the decisive year for Wesley's "change from a faith in faith to faith itself, from aspiration to assurance."¹⁷ By the end of that year he was no longer "an almost Christian;" he had become "an altogether Christian."¹⁸ Wesley's "faith of a servant" had become the "faith of a son." At Aldersgate Wesley personally joins the ranks of the sixteenth century reformers. As William R. Cannon puts it:

What Wesley really learned at Aldersgate and in the events which preceded and led up to it was that man is justified by the grace of God alone, and that this grace is given only through faith.¹⁹

Returning from a visit to the Moravians in Germany in the fall of 1738, Wesley resumed his preaching in the churches with new-found zeal. Still, his efforts seemed ineffective. Then he read Jonathan Edwards's A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton... in New England. This account of the Great Awakening in America was to strongly influence the Wesleyan revival in England. Shortly afterwards came the catalyst for Wesley's work to commence -- his friend and fellow preacher, George Whitefield, asked Wesley to serve as leader of a revival he had started in Bristol.

¹⁷Albert C. Outler, John Wesley ("A Library of Protestant Thought") (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 14.

¹⁸Works, V, 17-25.

¹⁹op. cit., p. 68-9.

With fear and trepidation Wesley agreed to preach on the highways and byways of Bristol. To his astonishment the crowds were visibly moved at his preaching. The conversions taking place before his eyes were as remarkable as the ones he had read about in Edwards's account. The Revival had begun!

The Bristol revival set the pattern for the remaining half-century of Wesley's life. In triumphs and setbacks John Wesley was henceforth the indefatigable itinerant preacher whose mission was "to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land."²⁰

Wesley soon found himself at odds with the bishops and clergy of the Church of England. He refused to obey the church law which forbade priests to preach outside their own parish.²¹ Convinced that God had called him to serve the Church with a more adequate and more effective ministry of preaching, Wesley gives an account of his "disobedience":

Man forbids me (to preach) in another's parish: that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man?... Suffer me now to tell you my principles in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work I know God has called me to; and sure I am that his blessing attends it.²²

²⁰Francis J. McConnell, John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1939), p. 257.

²¹There was an old tradition that anyone ordained at Oxford was not ordained for any particular diocese.

²²Letter to James Hervey, March 20, 1939.

While Wesley continued to have his problems with the Anglican hierarchy, he always remained a loyal priest of the Church of England. His Methodism was a movement within the Church. It is in this sense that comparisons have been made between Methodist societies and the Mendicant Orders of Friars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Roman Catholic Church.²³

The organization of these societies within the established parishes stands as a testimony to Wesley's passion for system and order. Wesley was completely against preaching to masses of people without the possibility of a "follow up":

I am more and more convinced that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore, I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one blow in any place where I cannot follow up the blow.²⁴

To his few ordained colleagues Wesley added lay preachers -- to the further annoyance of Church authorities. However, he refused to grant them any authority to administer the sacraments. Thus he manifested his loyalty to the established Church. Another example of his genius for organization was his initiation in 1744 of the "Annual Conference," which was to become the unique organ for shaping policy and doctrine in the Methodist movement.

Wesley's relation to the Church of England remained strained throughout his life. To understand this relationship we must know something about the general condition of the Church in Wesley's day.

²³David C. Shipley, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁴Works, I, 416.

A general assessment of this situation would point out that the setting for the Wesleyan revival was an apathetic church, stifled by the rationalistic and deistic philosophy which characterized the intellectual temper of the eighteenth century:

The Hanoverian Church of England, despite its redeeming qualities, stood sorely in need of reform. The age of reason had forgotten certain fundamental human needs; natural religion might satisfy the minds of some, but the hearts of multitudes were hungry. The weaknesses of the established church -- its failure to provide adequate care, the inflexibility of its parish system, its neglect of the new towns -- left a vast and needy population waiting to be touched by a new word of power. "Just at this time, when we wanted little of 'filling up the measure of our iniquities,' two or three clergymen of the Church of England began vehemently to 'call sinners to repentance.' In two or three years they had sounded the alarm to the utmost borders of the land. Many thousands gathered to hear them; and in every place where they came, many began to show such a concern for religion as they never had done before." This is Wesley's own account of the beginnings of the Methodist revival.²⁵

The development of a systematic presentation of doctrine or theology was not to be Wesley's approach to this situation.

As William R. Cannon puts it:

The Wesleyan Revival... made no attempt to meet the intellectual attack of deism; it did not defend Christianity on a rationalistic basis. It was content merely to assert its own faith and to give testimony to the truth of God as it found that truth expressed in the Bible.²⁶

²⁵G. R. Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1960) p. 141.

²⁶op. cit., p. 20.

Methodists have always been known for their interest in doctrine or theology only as a guide to right conduct. The de-emphasis of doctrinal concerns gave Methodism the reputation of being "nontheological."²⁷ However, in recent years there has been a renewed interest in the theological contributions of John Wesley.²⁸

The doctrines affirmed by the Methodists were those of the Church of England as expressed in the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Book of Homilies. The Bible was held to be the supreme test of any doctrine. The doctrinal emphases of Wesley were those demanded by the very nature of a revival. For instance, the fallen state of man and his need for redemption are particularly highlighted in any evangelical revival.²⁹ Again, like every revival, the conversion of the sinner is central to Wesley's thought. But characteristic of the Methodist movement is Wesley's concern not only with the justification of the sinner but especially with his sanctification.

Controversy occasioned the clarification of Wesley's doctrine in two major instances: his disagreement with George Whitfield in 1740-41 and his stand against antinomianism in 1770-71. The first controversy concerned the doctrine of election. In a letter to his mother in 1725 Wesley gave his view of the doctrine of predestination:

²⁷Robert E. Chiles, Theological Transition in American Methodism (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965) p. 22.

²⁸Ibid., p. 23.

²⁹Wesley's distinctive modifications of this doctrine of the fall will be considered at length in Part II of this investigation.

What, then, shall I say of Predestination? An everlasting purpose of God to deliver some from damnation does, I suppose, exclude all from that deliverance who are not chosen ... How is this consistent with either the Divine Justice or Mercy? ... That God should be the author of sin and injustice (which must, I think, be the consequence of maintaining this opinion) is a contradiction to the clearest ideas we have of the divine nature and perfections.³⁰

For Wesley, to affirm predestination is to affirm divine reprobation. In his sermon on "Free Grace" he listed what he considered to be the terrible effects of this doctrine. It was the publication of this sermon that occasioned the attack of George Whitefield:

Call it therefore by whatever name you please, election, preterition, predestination, or reprobation, it comes in the end to the same thing. The sense of all is plainly this, -- by virtue of an eternal, unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned; it being impossible that any of the former should be damned, or that any of the latter should be saved.

But if this is so, then is all preaching vain . . . it directly tends to destroy that holiness which is the end of all the ordinances of God. . . This doctrine tends to destroy the comfort of religion, the happiness of Christianity. . . This uncomfortable doctrine directly tends to destroy our zeal for good works. . . this doctrine not only tends to destroy Christian holiness, happiness, and good works, but hath also a direct and manifest tendency to overthrow the whole Christian Revelation.³¹

³⁰Letter to Susannah Wesley, July 29, 1725.

³¹Works, VII, 373 ff.

This dispute with Whitefield provided the occasion for Wesley to develop his anti-Calvinistic theology of the universal salvific will of God. In this context he asserts the doctrine of "prevenient grace" to explain the universally present grace of God.³²

The second major controversy came in 1770. George Whitefield had just died, but other leaders of the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion³³ attacked Wesley with great bitterness. The issue was the charge of antinomianism against Wesleyan Methodists. This dispute gave Wesley another occasion for theological development.

Wesley saw that the real cause of the popular antinomian attitude was a fundamental misunderstanding of a central tenet of Protestantism, the Lutheran emphasis on the "imputed righteousness of Christ." Simply stated, this is the problem: if justification consists only in the imputation of the merits of Christ to the sinner, why should the man thus justified worry about his own righteousness? Wesley answers this problem by distinguishing between "justification" and "sanctification":

³²Part II of this study will concentrate on the elaboration and the ramifications of this doctrine.

³³"Societies formed in separate places... were tied to one another in what Methodists then and now speak of as a 'connection.'" (cf. N. B. Harmon, Understanding the Methodist Church (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1961), p. 14.

But do you (Wesley) believe in inherent righteousness? Yes, in its proper place; not as the ground of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of imputed righteousness, but as consequent upon it. That is, I believe God implants righteousness in every one to whom he has imputed it. I believe "Jesus Christ is made of God unto us sanctification," as well as "righteousness;" or, that God sanctifies, as well as justifies, all them that believe in him. They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed, are made righteous by the Spirit of Christ; are renewed in the image of God, "after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness."³⁴

Thus, the Christian life begins with justification by faith alone, based on the imputed righteousness of Christ. However, this faith is a "faith which works by love" toward sanctification.

Salvation is a redemptive process,³⁵ begun by the faith-event of justification and perfected by the life-long faith-events of sanctification through God-given acts of perfect love of neighbor.

The above citations from Wesley's works should be sufficient to appreciate some of his major contributions to theological thought. At the heart of these contributions is his own "basic theological insight;"

Theology exists in order to enhance the Christian life guided by an ethic rooted in the dynamic of Christian love, lured by the optimistic hope of an attainable Christian perfection or wholeness, based upon the sole initiative of God in the whole life of the whole man, everywhere, always.³⁶

³⁴Works, V, 241.

³⁵cf. Shipley, op. cit., p. 38-9.

³⁶Ibid., p. 40.

METHODISM AND AMERICA

Unofficial lay preachers introduced Methodism to the American Colonies in 1760. The first Wesleyan preachers as such arrived in 1769; with Wesley's appointment or consent they continued to come until 1774. In 1773 the first American Methodist Conference was held in Philadelphia. This Conference was to serve as the foundation of the structure of American Methodism. The minutes of this Conference approximate the total number of members as 1,160.

From 1760 to 1784 American Methodism chose, designated, and licensed its preachers in accord with the procedures governing lay preachers in British Methodism. No Anglican bishop would ordain them, and Wesley would not permit them to seek ordination in any other way. Then came the American Revolution.

In a very real sense the independence of the United States and that of the Methodist Church were interwoven. As the Revolution seemed imminent, Methodists in America faced the problem of a divided allegiance both politically and religiously. While John Wesley retained absolute sway over British Methodism, his American co-religionists were conscious of the fact that lay preachers, not Wesley, were responsible for Methodism's introduction to the American scene. In addition to this fact, Wesley was out of sympathy with the impending revolution:

Ten times over, in different words, you "profess yourselves to be contending for liberty." But it is a vain, empty profession; unless you mean by that threadbare word, a liberty from your

rightful Sovereign, and from keeping the fundamental laws of your country. And this undoubtedly it is, which the confederated colonies are now contending for.³⁷

The publication of Wesley's "Calm Address to the American Colonies" not only embarrassed American Methodists but even alienated them from their compatriots. Methodists in the Colonies, already suspected of being Anglicans and Tories, endured several years of persecution on account of disaffection and distrust.

On September 2, 1784, a year after the Treaty of Paris formally ended the Revolutionary War, John Wesley performed the ordinations that were to make possible the establishment of an independent Methodist Church in the newly created nation. The new church grew with the new nation. Renewed revivals in 1785 and the years following extended Methodism widely. "Methodism's remarkably effective organization, simplified theology, basically democratic appeal, and revivalistic fervor contributed greatly to this expansion."³⁸

Although Anglicanism was the earliest form of American Protestantism, it was never really capable of capitalizing on this advantage. Perhaps the main reason for this failure was the lack of American bishops, and thus, a fully developed church order was impossible. By the end of the colonial era the two numerically largest forms of Protestantism in America were the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. At this time there were as many Baptists as

³⁷Works, XI, 90.

³⁸H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, Lefferts A. Loetscher, American Christianity, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 367.

there were Anglicans with the Quakers in fifth place numerically. Behind all this diversity, however, there was a substantial unity of belief:

From the theological point of view... it was the stamp of Geneva which left the deepest mark upon American Pretestantism during this early period, when it was being shaped to a common pattern.³⁹

This Calvinistic background of the English-speaking churches was well suited to the conditions of colonial America. Calvinism provided the strong virtues necessary to civilize the wilderness; acceptance of the dura et aspera of pioneer life was sustained by the characteristically stern dedication to the will of God in Calvinism.

While Calvinism was the predominant theological factor in the religion of colonial America, perhaps the more significant factor in the religious history of the new nation was the revitalizing phenomena beginning in the eighteenth century -- the evangelistic revivals. The Great Awakening was the first example in American life of revivalism on a grand scale. Early in the eighteenth century the vast majority of the colonial population was outside church membership. The answer to this problem was the outburst of religious fervor known as "The Great Awakening," which spread throughout the American Colonies. Mention has already been made of Jonathan Edwards's Account . . . of the revival in New England, which had a profound influence on John Wesley. In the other colonies there were several phases of the revival:

³⁹Winthrop S. Hudson, American Protestantism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 22-3.

The initial phase was a Presbyterian revival initiated by men from the New Brunswick Presbytery in New Jersey. The second phase was a back-country revival under the leadership of Shubal Stearns, a "separate" Baptist from New England. The final phase, on the eve of the American Revolution, was a typically Methodist development among the Anglicans, stemming largely from the influence of Devereux Jarratt, an evangelical-minded rector in Dinwiddie County, Virginia.⁴⁰

The revival spread to England through the activity of George Whitefield and then returned to America through Wesley's Methodists to continue the new religious life that had come out of the Awakening. In the years following the Methodists were to become the largest denomination in America and the most influential force in the formation of the tone of American Protestantism. Martin Marty has described the significance of the Awakening for American religion:

In 1895 the historian of American Presbyterianism, Robert Ellis Thompson saw the true significance of the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century. That awakening of American evangelicalism, he said, "terminated the Puritan and inaugurated the Pietist or Methodist age of American Church History." It was the hinge from Calvinist to Arminian America.⁴¹

When we take a closer look at American Protestantism, we can see that its unique character has been formed in large measure by peculiarly Methodist contributions. Perhaps the most pervasive influence of Wesley's followers on the structure of American Protestantism is the well known "denominational" theory of the Church. The word itself was given currency by John Wesley:

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 31.

⁴¹Marty, op. cit., p. 28.

I refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever denomination, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all. Dost thou love and fear God: It is enough! I give thee the right hand of friendship.⁴²

While such a concept was well suited to the conditions of religious life in the United States, there were serious weaknesses in it. It hastened the growth of indifferentism in its unsuccessful attempt to keep the balance between sectarianism and reductionism:

As a means of expressing theologically the unity that existed among the major Protestant bodies, the denominational theory enabled them to cooperate in good conscience for the achievement of those great ends which they had in common. The great temptation, however, was to transform the denominational theory from a means of expressing unity into a means of securing unity -- to seek to enlist all men of good will under the banner of righteousness by a progressive narrowing of the central core of the Christian faith until little remained that was theologically incisive or distinctively Christian.⁴³

Methodism, "the most American of Churches," has also to a large extent determined the "religious vocabulary" of Americans. "Largely because of the revival, 'commitment' and 'decision' have become the standard terms in American English for the establishment of the relation of faith between God and man, and 'to get religion' seems to have been derived from the same historical source.⁴⁴

⁴²Works, VIII, 332-3

⁴³Hudson, op. cit., p. 47

⁴⁴Jaroslav J. Pelikan, "Methodism's Contribution to America," The History of American Methodism, Vol. III, p. 598.

Much has been written on the relation between Methodism and the American frontier. As the nation moved westward, Methodist preachers in great numbers seized this opportunity of following the example of their itinerant founder:

A church that had been forged in the heat of one man's search for such vigor and power and in his rediscovery of the essence of evangelical Christianity was ideally suited to the demands of the frontier. ... Here men found the Christian message of judgment and grace addressed to their lost condition. Methodist sermons and hymns created an awareness of the specific sins of a frontier society, and the decisions elicited by the revival made the faith of distant centuries an existential thing. Because the spirit of the frontier has been shared by colonists and settlers, pioneers and immigrants, the Methodist way of faith and obedience has become embedded in the American experience, . . .⁴⁵

Among the reasons for the phenomenal success of Methodism in the United States is the clear connaturality of Methodist theology with the American spirit. Although Methodist polity is "in principle entirely hierarchical, and is in so far in remarkable contrast with the political republicanism of the United States,"⁴⁶ Methodist doctrine is definitely "anti-aristocratic."⁴⁷ John Wesley had always stood clearly for the universal salvific will of God against the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election and predestination. Timothy Smith sums up the Methodist doctrinal heritage which accounted for its popularity among Americans:

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 602-3.

⁴⁶Philip Schaff, America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1961), p. 140; as quoted in Pelikan, op. cit., p. 612.

⁴⁷Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 25.

. . . Methodists had proclaimed free will and free grace from the beginning. Wesley modified the Calvinist notion of man's total depravity, to which the doctrine of predestination was related. He taught instead that God had mitigated our sin by giving every man the ability to respond to the call of the gospel. Free, but morally responsible to yield to God, every sinner might hope to find at the Methodist mourner's bench a positive inner assurance of personal salvation. He might then seek with confidence the "second blessing", called entire sanctification, which would cleanse away the moral depravity of his soul.⁴⁸

Thus the Methodist preaching of the availability of salvation for all found a resounding echo in the egalitarian American spirit. Methodism added something unique to the earlier nineteenth century American theological milieu "in its emphasis on man's essential freedom as being within the context of redemptive grace -- its doctrine of gracious ability."⁴⁹ As time went on, however, the affirmation of "free will" was gradually removed from its context of "free grace." This development moves from a supernatural context wherein freedom is seen as a possibility of grace to a position wherein freedom is viewed as intrinsic to the nature of man:

The debate begins in Wesley with a strongly soteriological concern, marked by the conviction that freedom cannot be discussed apart from the wider context of redemption. Midway in the nineteenth century, however, the discussion was shifted to an anthropological setting. Freedom is derived from psychological and philosophical analysis of man. The doctrine of freedom thus developed is latterly brought to the process of salvation and effort is made to fit it in . . . For Wesley, grace is the basis of man's freedom; for Knudson (a major nineteenth century Methodist theologian) freedom must necessarily be intrinsic to man's own nature.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Leland H. Scott, "Methodist Theology in America in the Nineteenth Century," Religion in Life, XXV (1955-56), p. 91.

⁵⁰Robert E. Chiles, "Methodist Apostasy: From Free Grace to Free Will," Religion in Life, XXVII (1957-58), p. 448.

The passage quoted above points to the truth behind the thesis that American Methodism can be considered as "an experiment in secular Christianity."⁵¹ As Wesley himself once said: "The most prevailing fault among the Methodists is to be too outward in religion."⁵² This "fault" of "outwardness" found fertile soil for realization in America. As the most worldly orientated of American Protestant churches, Methodism has experienced both the successes and failures consequent upon any pragmatic form of "Christian secularism." Shaping the States for democracy has been a definite contribution of American Methodism, but in this achievement Methodism has also suffered "contamination by the world."⁵³ The future of Wesley's Methodism lies in the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. And to that movement toward the one Church of Christ Methodists have much to offer; specifically, they bring the gift of their "Christian secularism":

The secular piety of Methodism, it is to be hoped, will keep the church faced toward the world. Granted. . . that Methodism's encounter with the world has not been an unbroken success, still, it has not retreated into an irrelevant pietism. Its conscience has been troubled by the problems of world peace, economic justice, racial fair play, even though its achievements have fallen below its pronouncements. Methodism will help to ensure that the "faith and order" of the Ecumenical Church do not swallow up "life and work" in the world.⁵⁴

⁵¹F. Gerald Ensley, "American Methodism: An Experiment in Secular Christianity," The History of American Methodism, Vol. III, p. 615 ff. By "secular Christianity" Ensley means "a religion that takes the world for its medium and measures its success by the degree that it changes the individuals who comprise the world. . . In the broadest sense, Methodism represents a secular movement within Protestantism." (p. 616).

⁵²Letter to John Valton, Nov. 12, 1771.

⁵³F. G. Ensley, op. cit., p. 625.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 627.

CHAPTER II

THE ECUMENICAL DIMENSIONS OF JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

Who should know better than we that denominations may be justified in their existence for this "time being" or that, but not forever? We were commissioned by the Spirit of God "for the time being" to carry out an extraordinary mission of witness and service, for just so long as our life apart is effective in the economy of God's providence. We are, or ought to be, prepared to risk our life as a separate church and to face death as a denomination in the sure and lively hope of our resurrection in the true community of the whole people of God.¹

This "policy statement" of a prominent Methodist theologian of our time is a clear testimony to the fact that among the most fruitful features of John Wesley's Methodism for the future of Christianity is its ecumenical posture as a church. Always faithful in this respect to its founder, historical Methodism views itself as a church, or better, perhaps, as a movement of the Spirit, within the "catholic or universal Church."²

John Wesley, then, seems to occupy a providential middle position. Whilst never straying from the teaching passed on to him by Catholic tradition,

¹Albert C. Outler, That the World May Believe (New York: Joint Commission on Education and Cultivation, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1966), p. 74-5.

²cf. John Wesley, Works, VI, 395.

the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, he yet emphasizes the necessity of the inner experience, the call, which leads to an evangelical and apostolic life, a factor which had become dimmed in the English society of his time, though it had not disappeared from the Anglican body itself.³

This "middle position" is part of Methodism's heritage from Anglicanism. In the century before Wesley through the work of Richard Hooker especially, the Church of England had come to its corporate self-awareness as an "honest attempt to steer a middle course" between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and radical Protestantism.⁴ Within this Anglican tradition of the via media Methodism was born.

Obviously, it will be from the Roman Catholic point of view that this chapter will consider some of the highlights of the ecumenical dimension of Wesleyan thought. The theme, introduced above, of Methodism (as an Anglican phenomenon) as a "middle way" between Catholicism and Protestantism offers a promising beginning for this discussion. In his book, John Wesley and the Catholic Church, John M. Todd notes the presence in Wesley of both the "Catholic" religious characteristic -- "a strong sense of the Church as an institution" -- and the "Protestant" religious factor -- "the sense of God's call to the individual."⁵ However, following

³John M. Todd, John Wesley and the Catholic Church (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), p. 22.

⁴William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1946), p. 32.

⁵Todd, op. cit., p. 28.

the lead of Louis Bouyer's famous interpretations of Protestantism,⁶ Todd maintains that the "Protestant factor" in Wesley's thought -- the experience of God's call to the individual -- is a true Catholic tradition.⁷ Todd does admit that "as Wesley received this tradition it was a fact a Protestant thing."⁸ And immediately the question of Wesley's attitudes toward the Catholic Church is raised.

For the most part it is true to say that Wesley's regard for the Church of Rome was in accord with the general English viewpoint of his time. With the downfall of James II and the succession of William III Protestantism seemed to have finally and utterly triumphed over Catholicism in England. During the eighteenth century Roman Catholicism was barely tolerated throughout Great Britain. This general atmosphere of suspicion and distrust of "Romanism" and "Popery" accounts for the anti-Catholic statements of Wesley. However, what is uncommon in Wesley's attitude toward Roman Catholicism is his friendliness to Catholics as people and his sincere attempts to understand the doctrinal positions of the Roman Church. For instance, he reads the acts of the Council of Trent.⁹ Unfortunately, the lack of

⁶cf. Louis Bouyer, The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1961).

⁷Todd, op. cit., p. 28.

⁸Ibid., p. 28.

⁹According to his Journal for August 27, 1739 (Works, I, 220) Wesley read "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent." printed at Colen and "approved by authority."

necessary hermeneutical tools left him unable to understand the Tridentine decrees in their historical setting. As John Todd remarks, Wesley would be quite surprized to hear his conclusion that all of the principal Wesleyan doctrines are in fact orthodox from the Catholic point of view.¹⁰

With regard to doctrines and orthodoxy Wesley himself had some seemingly startling things to say. He makes a very interesting distinction between essential truth and "opinion." As Albert Outler puts it, there was a "basic difference in Wesley's mind between the fact of faith and all the conceptualizations of faith."¹¹ Some of Wesley's own remarks in this vein are famous:

The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. ... as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.¹²

In his Plain Account of the People Called Methodists Wesley goes even further:

...orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all; ...¹³

¹⁰Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹Outler, ed., John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 92.

¹²Works, VIII, 340

¹³Ibid., 249.

It would be unfair to judge from the above remarks that Wesley was indifferent to the truth of the Christian message. While he dismisses "opinions" as of no real importance, he insists on the "grand scriptural doctrines":

Let us keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines which he (Whitefield) everywhere delivered. There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may "agree to disagree." But, meanwhile, let us hold fast the essentials of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints"; and which this champion of God so strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places.¹⁴

As Robert E. Chiles remarks, Wesley is never indifferent to the "grand scriptural doctrines."¹⁵ To identify these doctrines Chiles refers to the list compiled by Colin W. Williams; according to Williams the following are the doctrines which "Wesley variously insists on as essential: original sin, the deity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith alone, the work of the Holy Spirit (including new birth and holiness) and the Trinity."¹⁶

As Williams points out, Wesley's overriding concern is for unity in witness. In this regard he quotes from Wesley's famous sermon, "The Catholic Spirit:"

¹⁴Works, IX, 429.

¹⁵Robert E. Chiles, Theological Transition in American Methodism (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 27.

¹⁶Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 16-7.

I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, Are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not, Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? nor whether, in the administration of baptism, you agree with me in admitting sureties (godparents) for the baptized; in the manner of administering it; or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you (as clear as I am in my own mind), whether you allow baptism and the Lord's supper at all. Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season; my only question is this, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"¹⁷

In that same sermon, however, Wesley assures us that he does not opt for "speculative latitudinarianism":

A Catholic spirit is not "speculative latitudinarianism." It is not an indifference to all opinions: This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being "driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine," is a great curse, not a blessing; an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. A man of a truly catholic spirit, has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. It is true, he is always ready to hear and weigh whatsoever can be offered against his principles; but as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any. He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavor to blend them into one. Observe this, you who know not what spirit ye are of; who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding... Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.¹⁸

¹⁷Works, V, 496-7

¹⁸Ibid., 502.

Even "practical latitudinarianism" is not acceptable to Wesley:

It (a catholic spirit) is not indifferent as to public worship, or as to the outward manner of performing it. This, likewise, would not be a blessing, but a curse.... But the man of a truly catholic spirit... is clearly convinced that this manner of worshipping God is both scriptural and reasonable. He is fixed in his opinion as well as his principles, not only in spirit, but in the lives of Christian fellowships, all the ordinary

From this it follows that it would be unfair to charge Wesley with latitudinarianism. While it is true to say that Methodism is a departure from the living relation of men to God that the Bible interprets that relation,²⁰ we are not aware of what exactly Wesley meant by the term. Several scholarly explanations have been proffered, with a worthy degree of similarity among them. Mention has already been made of Albert Outler's interpretation of Wesley's views on doctrine; he states further:

Wesley's point... is that religious reality lies deeper than religious conceptuality -- as evidenced by those simple but true believers whose "opinions" may be incompetent and those impeccably "orthodox" persons whose hearts nevertheless remain estranged from God and man. Opinions, then, are ways of comprehending (or miscomprehending) reality. The important thing is that reflection upon reality not be confused

¹⁹Ibid., 502-3.

²⁰S. Paul Schilling, Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective (Methodism and Society, Vol. III) (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960) p. 25.

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He is fixed in his congregation as well as his principles. He is united to one, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship. There he partakes of all the ordinances of God.¹⁹

From the above passages it is obvious that it would be unfair to charge Wesley with indifferentism. While it is true to say that Methodism is "concerned more with the living relation of men to God than with the doctrines that interpret that relation,"²⁰ we must seek a deeper understanding of what exactly Wesley meant by the word, "opinions." Several scholarly explanations have been proffered with a noteworthy degree of similarity among them. Mention has already been made of Albert Outler's interpretation of Wesley's views on doctrine; he states further:

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¹⁹Ibid., 502-3.

²⁰S. Paul Schilling, Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective (Methodism and Society, Vol. III) (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960) p. 25.

with reality itself. Wesley is quite specific and quite adamant about the essential doctrines of Christianity -- and quite "orthodox!" Yet his "catholic spirit" seeks to find that community of Christians which is constituted by faith and love ("thy 'heart' as my 'heart'"), and which is a necessary precondition to the fruitful negotiation of legitimate differences of opinion and practice.²¹

John M. Todd offers an interesting comparison between Wesley and a later Oxford Theologian, John Henry Newman on this matter of doctrines. Todd sees Wesley's approach to "opinions" as similar to Newman's famous distinction between "notional" and "real" assent:

Wesley's life happily illustrates a thesis of his reforming successor at Oxford, John Henry Newman, that mere "notional" assent to Christian doctrine is insufficient. There must be a further inner assent, an assent of experience, coming from knowledge less easily defined but deeper and more compelling. Wesley and Newman have both been attacked for abandoning Christian doctrine, in the sense of opposing its traditional theoretical and objective expression. But in neither case has the attack been sustained. They opposed only the abuse involved in a mechanical interpretation of this doctrine.

In Newman's thought "real" assent is part of a well-articulated philosophy of the faith of an ordinary Christian, an explanation, a justification of the charcoal-burner's faith. In Wesley the thought is simpler. ... Without going into the modes of faith, ...without even providing an embryo idea of Newman's illative sense, Wesley did succeed in bringing the great Christian doctrines down to earth, into the hearts and minds of miners and domestic servants, of men and women who were commonly by-passed by religion in his age. ...The faith that Newman had in mind, the faith of millions of ordinary Catholic families, was not so far removed from the faith which Wesley inspired in the people of England. Love was the heart of it. Without this love, Christian doctrines were, for Wesley, little more than the harsh bonds of the old "law."²²

²¹Outler, John Wesley, p. 92.

²²Todd, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

In accordance with his view of "orthodoxy" Wesley demanded no doctrinal test for admission into any Methodist society. In his own words: "There is no other society under heaven which requires nothing of men in order to their admission into it but a desire to save their souls."²³ Obviously, there are some pre-suppositions to "a desire to save one's soul." Again, the doctrinal beliefs presupposed are "the grand scriptural doctrines."

Perhaps light can be thrown on Wesley's position on doctrine from a review of our own contemporary Catholic theology of faith. The distinction between faith and belief is an important issue in current Catholic thought. As is well known, in her polemics against the Protestant stress on the fides qua creditur Catholicism has placed strong emphasis on the fides quae creditur.²⁴ However, in its pre-Reformation tradition Catholic theology always affirmed the primacy of the interior, personal faith-commitment.²⁵ It is this tradition which is being reappropriated today in Catholic thought:

Both aspects (personal-inner and doctrinal-outer) are as necessary to faith as they are to revelation. It is the vital fusion of both that constitutes the act of faith. However, each is

²³Works, .

²⁴cf. Otto Semmelroth, "Belief as Grace," Toward a Theology of Christian Faith ("Readings in Theology: Canisianum Series," Vol. V) (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1968), p. 110.

²⁵cf. St. Thomas Aquinas on the primacy of the personal aspect of faith: II-II, q. 11, a. 1; q. 1, a. 1; q. 2 a. 2.

not of equal importance. The inner-personal aspect, "believing in God", has the principal place. The primary purpose of faith, determined by God's ineffable attraction toward himself, is to enter into contact with God himself. Through faith man seeks God principally in the personal role of his self-revelation, to receive from him what he reveals of himself; this is the only way the content of revelation is accepted as the Word of God himself. We believe that God reveals because it is God who reveals it.²⁶

While not abandoning the distinctive Catholic witness to the importance of the fides quae creditur, the II Vatican Council in its Decree on Ecumenism officially introduces an apposite nuance:

When comparing doctrines, they (Catholic theologians) should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith.²⁷

Commenting on this conciliar text as regards the "foundation of the Christian faith," Karl Rahner states:

There is, then, according to the Council, a foundation, an innermost core in the reality of faith, relative to which all other realities and propositions are considered. This core can be, from the nature of the case, only God himself, insofar as he, through his absolute communication of himself, has become our salvation, hence that which we commonly call in theology "uncreated grace." Salvation comes from possessing it; without it, there is no salvation. Therefore, it must belong at the very least to the core of salvific and theological reality.²⁸

²⁶Juan Alfaro, "The Dual Aspect of Faith," (Concilium, Vol. XXI) (New York: Paulist Press, 1967) p. 61.

²⁷Walter M. Abbott (ed.), "Decree on Ecumenism," (The Documents of Vatican II) (New York: Guild Press, 1966), par. 11, p. 354.

²⁸Karl Rahner, "Grundsätzliche Überlegungen zur Anthropologie im Rahmen der Theologie," Mysterium Salutis ("Die Heilsgeschichte vor Christus," Vol. II) (Zurich: 1967).

Notwithstanding the obvious "language differential," it is safe to say that John Wesley would agree with the intent of Rahner's statement quoted above. In distinguishing between marginal opinions and essential beliefs, Wesley "found the primary significance of the latter in their contributions to the life transformed and empowered by God."²⁹ For this itinerant preacher of Christianity, the good news of salvation was paramount:

Determinative of his theological emphasis was his practical concern for the salvation of men. His central theme, therefore, was salvation, and all other elements in his theology revolved around this.³⁰

From an ecumenical point of view it is interesting to see how Wesley's stand on the relationship between faith and doctrine affected his ecclesiology. In his sermon "Of the Church" he gives us a "clear unexceptionable answer" to the question: What is the Church:

The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be "one body," united by "one Spirit;" having "one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all."³¹

²⁹Schilling, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁰Ibid., p. 44.

³¹Works, VI, 395-6.

Within the universal or Catholic Church Wesley recognizes the local churches:

That part of this great body, of the universal Church, which inhabits any one kingdom or nation, we may properly term a National Church; as, the Church of France, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland. A smaller part of the universal Church are the Christians that inhabit one city or town; as the Church of Ephesus, and the rest of the seven Churches mentioned in the Revelation. Two or three Christian believers united together are a Church in the narrowest sense of the word.³²

As Wesley notes, his conception of the Church is broader than the definition of the Church as found in the nineteenth Article of the Church of England which affirms: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered."³³ Having explained that the phrase "faithful men" means "men endued with living faith,"³⁴ Wesley states his reservations on this official definition:

I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be the "pure word of God," are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not "duly administered." Certainly if these things are so, the Church of Rome is not so much a part of the catholic Church;

³²Ibid., 396.

³³Ibid., 397.

³⁴Ibid., 396. (*italics his*).

seeing therein neither is "the pure word of God" preached, nor the sacraments "duly administered." Whoever they are who have "one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all," I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship: Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church;...³⁵

While Wesley's emphasis on essentials in doctrine afforded him a rather broadminded concept of the Church, his appreciation of the regular ministry and the church order of the Anglican community balanced his ecclesiology. In a sermon on "The Ministerial Office,"³⁶ preached in Cork, Ireland in 1789 Wesley carefully distinguished the priestly and the prophetic forms of the ministry. In his respect for Church unity he never permitted his preachers to assume the role of priests in the administration of the sacraments. He considered his societies to be ecclesiolae within the ecclesia,³⁷ and he held his preachers to be an "extraordinary ministry" within the Church, "raised up to provoke the ordinary ones to jealousy."³⁸ The purpose of the Methodist societies was to assure the preaching of the word while the members preserved unity with the Anglican Church by attending her liturgy and receiving her sacraments. Here is a vital ecumenism long before the "Ecumenical Movement!"

³⁵Ibid., 397 (italics mine).

³⁶cf. Works, VII, 273-81.

³⁷cf. Williams, op. cit., p. 212.

³⁸Works, VII, 277.

In his sermon "On Schism" Wesley denies that the word itself refers to separation from the Church of Rome or of England or from any Church.³⁹ Interpreting the tenth verse of the first chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, he affirms that schismata means "not a separation from any Church (whether general or particular, whether the Catholic or any national Church,) but a separation in a Church."⁴⁰ Schism, therefore, points to "a disunion in mind and judgment, (perhaps also in affection) among those who, notwithstanding this, continued outwardly as before."⁴¹ Only in a "remote sense" can schism refer to "a causeless separation from a living body of Christians."⁴² In this sense schism is also evil, "a grievous breach of the law of love."⁴³ Only when one is certain that he cannot remain in a particular Church "with a clear conscience" or "without breaking a commandment of God" is there just cause for leaving a Church.⁴⁴

To summarize this line of thought let us go to Albert Outler, one of the most active Methodists in the contemporary

³⁹Works, VI, 401 ff. (*italics his*).

⁴⁰Ibid., 402 (*italics his*).

⁴¹Ibid., 403.

⁴²Ibid., 406.

⁴³Ibid., 406.

⁴⁴Ibid., 408.

ecumenical movement, who evinces his Wesleyan heritage when he writes:

Christian community is primary; Christian doctrines are explicative. A doctrinal system, a developed liturgy, a settled policy, all these are achievements possible only within a community that has its life and power from another originating source than these... The quest for unity between the divided Christians must begin with the mutual recognition of their actual community in Jesus Christ. For it is only in the atmosphere of acknowledged community that the quest for doctrinal consensus has any lively hope of succeeding.⁴⁵

Of special interest to any Catholic studying the ecumenical dimensions of Wesleyan thought is his famous "Letter to a Roman Catholic" of 1749. As Outler remarks: "Nothing quite like this little essay in ecumenical theology appears anywhere else in his writings, but it is consistent with his familiar distinction between essential beliefs and heterogenous opinions; it is a fair sample of what he actually meant by 'catholic spirit'."⁴⁶ Writing to an Irish Catholic in Dublin, Wesley summarizes the beliefs of a "true Protestant" in an endeavor "...as mildly and inoffensively as I can, to remove in some measure the ground of your unkindness by plainly declaring what our belief and what our practice is... "⁴⁷ After his statement of belief, Wesley asks his Catholic friend: "Now, do not you yourself approve of this? Is there one point you

⁴⁵Outler, The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 66.

⁴⁶Outler, John Wesley, p. 492-3.

⁴⁷Works, X, 81.

can condemn?... Come, my brother, and let us reason together...

Then if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike."⁴⁸ Wesley closes his letter with a request that he and his Catholic brother should "first, not hurt one another... secondly, speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other, ... thirdly, resolve to harbour no unkind thought, no unfriendly temper towards each other," and finally:

Let us, fourthly, endeavor to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom. So far as we can, let us always rejoice to strengthen each other's hands in God. Above all, let us each take heed unto himself (since each must give an account of himself to God) that he fall not short of the religion of love; that he be not condemned in what he himself approveth. O let you and me (whatever others do) press on to the prize of our high calling... "⁴⁹

As Wesley presents his beliefs in his famous "ecumenical letter," we find a creedal summary of the common faith of historic Christianity. In the book entitled Methodism edited by William K. Anderson Part II considers the "distinctive emphases" of Wesley's approach to Christianity. First among these is the theme of "salvation for all." Here is the heart of Wesley's faith and preaching, and it is this conceptualization of divine grace which constitutes the central concern of this present study. This chapter on ecumenical dimensions closes by highlighting the particular ecumenical significance of Wesley's doctrine on grace. In the words, again, of Albert Outler:

⁴⁸Ibid., 83 ff.

⁴⁹Ibid., 86.

...in the interpretation of this common faith John Wesley bequeathed us a distinctive accent on the cardinal concept of the grace of God that has a peculiar relevance in the current ecumenical dialogue with both our Protestant and Catholic brethren, though for rather different reasons in each case. Grace, in the Wesleyan tradition, is God's love-at-work, in all its manifold ways in history and human existence. God is utterly free and sovereign; it follows, therefore, that his grace is also free and unmerited. But, by the same token, his human creatures were made to be free and responsible (able to respond) to God's loving initiatives in creation. This means that God's grace is "prevenient" -- which reminds us that God must act before we can act, and that all our knowledge of God is of his love-in-action before and beyond our powers to manage it. God's grace is also "sustaining," even in the disorders which flow from our abuses of the grace of creation and the sin that corrupts our powers to live and to love. Grace is "saving" -- which means that God in Christ has broken sin's damning power to shut us off from grace. By reopening the way from death to life, grace gives us a "gracefull" future. Grace brings "assurance" -- the trusting heart may know God's pardoning love directly. Grace is "sacramental" but not sacerdotal -- God's love is revealed to us in a myriad of "outward and visible signs" in all the gracious incidents of existence -- but crucially and typically in the ritual symbols of birth and initiation (baptism and confirmation), and of nurture and maturation (Holy Communion). The effective "minister of grace" in every sacrament is God's Holy Spirit, who also gives to every event the quality of a sacramental occasion. Grace is "sanctifying" -- for our acceptance of God's love sets us to the lifelong task of graceful and gracious living -- which is what John Wesley meant by "Christian perfection!" Thus grace becomes both the energy and the governor of the Christian's ethical enterprises in his service of God's righteous rule in human affairs. Grace finally is eschatological: life and death and resurrection are so many aspects of God's concern for us. This complex understanding of God's love has a wide ranging significance for the problems

of ecumenical theology. It illuminates many a dark corner in our mutual understandings of revelation and faith, of conversion and nurture, of worship and work, of life in the Spirit and life in the Christian community. It opens a way between the "evangelical" and "catholic" traditions with its careful distinction between the sacramental and the sacerdotal.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Outler, That the World May Believe, p. 73-4.

CHAPTER III

WESLEY AND UNEVANGELIZED MAN

"Wesley always begins with man."¹ Such a general statement in no way purports to subordinate the classical Protestant emphasis on the divine initiative in salvation. It merely highlights the fact that for Wesley salvation is impossible for man without his free acceptance of grace. Indeed, "soteriology is prior to anthropology in Wesley."² As the indefatigable preacher of the Gospel, Wesley's chief concern was the salvation of his fellow men. His whole life was directed to evangelization in the conviction that "God wills the salvation of all men." Necessarily implied in any such dedication is an anthropology -- what is the condition of the potential recipient of the good news; who is the man in need of the gospel of salvation? This chapter will attempt to answer this question. To complete this picture we will also present in summary fashion Wesley's theology of the terminus ad quem, i.e., the process of salvation in the individual Christian.

¹William R. Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1946), p. 246.

²Lycurgus M. Starkey, The Work of the Holy Spirit (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 123.

The sources for this chapter will be basically the "standard Wesley," i.e., his sermons, the Notes on the New Testament, and the Twenty-five Articles; in so doing I am following the procedure of John Deschner in his book, Wesley's Christology. He states therein two reasons for his choice: 1) "they contain the doctrine for which Wesley himself was prepared to take the most serious kind of responsibility;"³ and, 2) "...a more important reason....the Methodist church has accepted them as representative expressions of its message."⁴

"In the old order of things man had been the physical center of creation. All nature had been construed in such a way as to magnify his pre-eminence and to substantiate his claim to supreme importance in the eyes of his Creator."⁵ Eighteenth century thought was well aware of the fact that "the Copernican revolution had dislodged man from the center of the universe."⁶ Continuing scientific advances had disrupted the old order, and philosophy and theology were compelled to rethink and reformulate their anthropologies. As William Cannon points out,⁷ two possibilities faced

³John Deschner, Wesley's Christology (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵Cannon, op. cit., p. 176.

⁶Floyd W. Matson, The Broken Image (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Anchor Books, 1966), p. 4.

⁷Cannon, op. cit., p. 177.

the philosophers and theologians; one was a negative defeatism (also hyper-defensiveness) in regard to the findings of modern science; the other was a positive reassessment of man's position in the universe in the light of scientific discoveries. John Wesley is an example of the latter approach. Indeed, his personal appreciation of the scientific milieu of his time is evidenced in his five volume compendium of natural philosophy entitled A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation. His conclusion to Volume IV is worth quoting in full:

Here I set bounds to my design. I have presented my readers with a variety of facts of an interesting nature, sufficient to enable them to form an idea of those pleasures which result from the contemplation of nature. But this contemplation would prove fruitless, did it not lead us to aspire incessantly after this adorable Being, by endeavouring to acquire a knowledge of him, from that immense chain of various productions wherein his power and wisdom are displayed with such distinguished lustre. He does not impart to us the knowledge of himself immediately; that is not the plan he has chosen; but he has commanded the heavens and the earth to proclaim his existence, to make him known to us. He has endued us with faculties susceptible of this divine language, and has raised up men who explore their beauties, and become their interpreters. Imprisoned for awhile in a small obscure planet, we only enjoy such a portion of light as is suitable to our present condition; let us wisely improve each glimmering ray reflected upon us, nor lose the smallest spark: let us continually advance in this Effulgent Light! A time will come when we shall draw all light from the Eternal Source of Light, and instead of contemplating the Divine Architect in the works of his hands, shall contemplate the workmanship in the Omnipotent Author thereof. "We now see things as through a glass darkly; but we shall then see face to face."⁸

⁸A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, IV (London: J. Paramore; 4th edition, 1784), pp. 332-33.

Nonplused by the revolution in science, Wesley took up the question of man explicitly in terms of the scientific experience of his day. In Sermon CIII entitled "What is man?" Wesley speaks of man in relation to the greatness of the whole physical universe; specifically, he raises the problem of man's "magnitude" and his "duration."⁹ With regard to the former he points out the seeming insignificance of man in the immensity of the universe; in terms of the latter he compares man's "threescore years and ten"¹⁰ with the biblical life span of Methuselah, the duration of the angels, and the eternity of God. Against these measuring rods man is indeed unimportant. Undaunted by these standards, however, Wesley confidently affirms that man is an immortal spirit and is thus ultimately "of more value than the sun, moon and stars put together; yea, than the whole material creation."¹¹ And beyond this there is yet another assurance of man's surpassing worth and dignity:

That no shadow of fear might remain, no possibility of doubting; to show what manner of regard the great eternal God bears to little, short-lived man, but especially to his immortal part; God gave his Son, "his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." See how God loved the world!¹²

⁹Works, VII, 168.

¹⁰Ibid., 169.

¹¹Ibid., 171.

¹²Ibid., 171-2.

Wesley dedicates another sermon (Sermon CIX) to the question of man. Having considered the human body as "composed of the four elements, duly proportioned and mixed together,"¹³ he goes on to speak of the soul, the "inward principle"¹⁴ of both thinking and willing and "governing every motion of the body."¹⁵ These reflections on the soul lead Wesley directly to the question, "What am I?"¹⁶ I must be something distinct from my body, since when my body dies, I will continue to exist. Balancing this somewhat one-sided emphasis on the spiritual, Wesley concludes that "in my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist both of soul and body; And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to all eternity."¹⁷

Wesley singles out for special mention "one more property, commonly called liberty."¹⁸ He considers liberty not as a property of the will, but a distinct property of the soul. Both "liberty of contradiction" and "liberty of contrareity" are affirmed as undeniable. Thus, he affirms the power to choose and do good but only "through the grace of God"¹⁹ because of "the corruption of my

¹³Ibid., 225.

¹⁴Ibid., 227.

¹⁵Ibid., 227.

¹⁶Ibid., 228 (*italics his*).

¹⁷Ibid., 228.

¹⁸Ibid., 228.

¹⁹Ibid., 229.

own nature."²⁰

This sermon ends with a few words on man's greatest glory and distinction, his finality. Though created in the image of God, man has sinned and thus has lost that image. God, however, has established a new covenant whereby through faith in Christ man can be restored to the favor and image of God.

MAN CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Wesley's theology of man as the image of God, lost and restored, affords us an excellent framework for the investigation of his religious anthropology within a soteriological context.

Ye know, that he who seeth what is in man gives a far different account both of nature and grace, of our fall and our recovery. Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent. Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul... By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed.²¹

Supralapsarian optimism characterizes Wesley's description of man created in the image of God:

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him: (Gen. 1:27) -- Not barely in his natural image, a picture of

²⁰Ibid., 228.

²¹Works, VI, 64-5.

his own immortality; a spiritual being, endowed with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections; -- nor merely in his political image, the governor of this lower world, having "dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth;" -- but chiefly in his moral image; which according to the Apostle, is "righteousness and true holiness." (Eph. 4:24)²²

Since man was created in the image of God who is Love, man at his creation was perfect in love. He was completely righteous -- on his heart God engraved the perfect moral law and required from man full obedience.

From Wesley the noting of man as the image of God is definitely "dynamic" rather than "static." Man's "natural" image -- the "static" image -- is not at all decisive. In fact, Wesley doubts that this "natural" image is even adequate to distinguish man from the brutes:

What then is the barrier between men and brutes?
It was not reason. Set aside that ambiguous term: Exchange it for the plain word, understanding: And who can deny that brutes have this? We may as well deny that they have sight or hearing.²³

The real image is the "moral" -- man's relationship to God in terms of holiness and love. The "moral" image of God is what defines man as he was meant to be by his Creator. What separates man from the brutes? --

²²Ibid., 66.

²³Works, VI, 244.

But is it not this: Man is capable of God; the inferior creatures are not. We have no ground to believe that they are, in any degree, capable of knowing, loving, or obeying God. This is the specific difference between man and brute; the great gulf which they cannot pass over.²⁴

The most perfect image of God is the most perfect man, Jesus Christ. "His internal righteousness is the image of God, stamped on every power and faculty of His soul. It is a copy of His divine righteousness, so far as it can be imparted to a human spirit."²⁵ It is this righteousness of Christ which is imputed to sinful man, and as a consequence of this, man is internally conformed to Christ and thus regains the image of God:

I believe 'Jesus Christ is made of God unto us sanctification,' as well as 'righteousness'; ...They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed are... renewed in the image of God, 'after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness.'²⁶

To the objection that Adam could not have been created in righteousness because "holiness in its nature implies the choice and consent of a moral agent, without which it cannot be holiness,"²⁷ Wesley replies:

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Works, V, 236

²⁶Ibid., 241

²⁷Works, IX, 292.

What is holiness? Is it not essentially love? the love of God, and of all mankind? love producing "bowels of mercies, humbleness, of mind, meekness, gentleness, long-suffering? And cannot God shed abroad this love in any soul without his concurrence, antecedent to his knowledge or consent? And supposing this to be done, will love change its nature? Will it be no longer holiness? ... Love is holiness wherever it exists. And God could create either men or angels, endued from the very first moment of their existence with whatsoever degree of love he pleased.²⁸

Thus, God did not first create man and then make him righteous; "Righteousness was concreated with him. With the same breath that God breathed into him a living soul, he breathed into him a righteous soul."²⁹ Wesley describes this original righteousness in terms of the conformity of all the faculties of man's soul to the moral law. With regard to knowledge man in the beginning grasped truth intuitively.³⁰

The Lord God... created man in his own image; --- in his own natural image, as to his better part; that is, a spirit, as God is a spirit; endued with understanding; which, if not the essence, seems to be the most essential property of a spirit. And probably the human spirit, like the angelical, then discerned truth by intuition. Hence, he named every creature, as soon as he saw it, according to its inmost nature.³¹

²⁸Ibid., 292.

²⁹Ibid., 430.

³⁰cf. Umphrey Lee, John Wesley and Modern Religion (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), p. 122.

³¹Works, VI, 269-70.

Because he was a creature, his knowledge was limited. He could, therefore, be ignorant, but not erroneous. Though "not mistaken in any thing, he was capable of mistaking, of being deceived, although not necessitated to it."³² For the universal obedience demanded of him, a perfect knowledge of the moral law written on his mind was necessary.

Man's will was conformed to the will of God with no inclination to evil. In fact, the will was naturally inclined to God and goodness, "disposed by its original make to follow the Creator's will, as the shadow does the body."³³ In turn, man's affections and passions were subordinate to his reason and will. Thus perfectly ordered, man was commanded to perfect obedience of the moral law.

To generalize on man's original righteousness Wesley called it "universal, and natural, yet mutable."³⁴ Universal since it encompassed the whole man for its subject; man was holy in soul and body. Universal, too, in its object since the fulfillment of the whole law was its object. Wesley calls it "natural" in the sense that man was created with it. "And so it was necessary to the perfection of man, as he came from the hand of God; necessary to constitute him in a state of integrity."³⁵ But this original

³²Ibid., 270.

³³Works, IX, 435.

³⁴Ibid., 435.

³⁵Ibid., 436.

righteousness was mutable -- though man was inclined toward good, he was not fixed in it. The door was open to the possibility of sin.

In communion with God man was happy as he was holy; he was the lord of the world, enjoying dominion over all creation. He lived in total tranquility with no pain or suffering. Finally, he was immortal; there would have been no death had man not sinned. Thus the picture drawn by Wesley of man in the state of original justice.

THE FALL OF MAN: ORIGINAL SIN

In a very long essay on The Doctrine of Original Sin, published in 1757, John Wesley defends "this great foundation of all revealed religion"³⁶ against the deistic tendencies of his day as exemplified in the rationalistic interpretation of Dr. John Taylor of Norwich. For Wesley the doctrine of original sin is "the fundamental point which differences Heathenism from Christianity."³⁷ As an itinerant evangelist Wesley was painfully aware of the need to convince his fellow men that they were in need of salvation from the effects of sin -- that even though man was created in perfection, he has lost that happy state through the sin of the first man, Adam, the "federal head or representative of mankind."³⁸ Before men can

³⁶Ibid., 434.

³⁷Works, VI, 63.

³⁸Works, IX, 332.

desire salvation, before they can want to "flee the wrath to come" (the only condition for joining the Methodists according to Wesley), they must be brought to a realization of the fact that they are sinners lost in a sinful world.

While the above mentioned Dr. Taylor would account for the presence of sin in the world on the basis of custom and bad education, Wesley strongly maintains the traditional position that the cause of sin is more fundamental and deep-rooted -- it exists in human nature itself. Wesley turns to Scripture for the answer to the question of the origin of evil, for without revelation man cannot answer this problem which "all the wisdom of man could not discover till it pleased God to reveal it to the world. Till then man was a mere enigma to himself; a riddle which none but God could solve."³⁹

Unde malum? "How came evil into the world?"
It came from Lucifer, son of the morning. It
was the work of the devil.⁴⁰

Wesley turns to the story of the Fall in Genesis. There he reads of Satan's temptation of Eve in leading her to disbelieve that God would carry out his threat to punish disobedience. Tempted in turn by Eve, Adam sinned and fell from grace.

"She gave unto her husband and he did eat."
He sinned with his eyes opened... And if this
is the case, there is no absurdity in the

³⁹Works, VI, 216.

⁴⁰Ibid., 271.

assertion of a great man, "That Adam sinned in his heart before he sinned outwardly; before he ate of the forbidden fruit;" namely, by inward idolatry by loving the creature more than the Creator.⁴¹

It was not the moral law inscribed in his heart that Adam disobeyed, but the special positive law superadded by God -- "Thou shalt not eat of the fruit of the tree that groweth in the midst of the garden."⁴² As Wesley comments: "At the critical point God's will is known not by nature, but by revelation."⁴³ There are several aspects to Adam's sin. It was unbelief in that he refused to believe God's warning regarding the effects of disobedience. It was disobedience, and finally, it was idolatry in that Adam chose the creature over the Creator.

As a result of his sin Adam lost the moral image of God and in part the natural. He lost the holiness and righteousness in which he was created -- that was his spiritual death.⁴⁴ From spiritual death came pain and suffering and physical mortality. For the image of God Adam exchanged the image of Satan.

So had he lost both the knowledge and love of God, without which the image of God could not subsist. Of this, therefore, he was deprived at the same time, and became unholy as well as unhappy. In the room of this, he had sunk into pride and self-will, the very image of the devil; and into sensual appetites and desires, the very image of the beasts that perish.⁴⁵

⁴¹Ibid., 217.

⁴²Works, V. 54.

⁴³Deschner, op. cit., p. 70.

⁴⁴Works, VI, 68.

⁴⁵Ibid., 67-8.

Adam's sin affected not only himself personally; it is the cause of the fall of all mankind. It is here that Wesley affirms the traditional doctrine of Paul and Augustine against the spirit of his day. For Wesley, Adam acted in the stead of all men; he states explicitly what he means by calling Adam the "federal head or representative of all mankind:" "The thing I mean is this: The state of all mankind did so far depend on Adam, that, by his fall, they all fell into sorrow, and pain, and death, spiritual and temporal."⁴⁶ By Adam's disobedience all men are made sinners, since all were then "in the loins of their first Parent, the common Head and Representative of them all."⁴⁷ Commenting on Romans 5:12: "...even so death passed upon all men, in that all sinned," Wesley explains that "all sinned -- in Adam."⁴⁸

Thus, the sin of Adam is imputed to all of his descendants. Although Wesley believed that children who have not committed personal sin will not "die eternally, merely for the sin of our first father"⁴⁹ because of the Atonement, he strongly held that even Adam's guilt is imputed to his posterity.⁵⁰ And since "man

⁴⁶Works, IX, 332.

⁴⁷Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sanford, 1844), 376; on Romans 5:19.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 375; on Romans 5:12.

⁴⁹Works, IX, 315.

⁵⁰cf. ibid., 307, 317.

was the channel of conveyance between the Creator and the whole brute creation,"⁵¹ the entire world is disrupted because of man's sin.

The essence of original sin, then, is the loss of original righteousness or the moral image of God. Adam's descendants, therefore, are born spiritually dead. To account for the transmission of original sin to all men Wesley merely states his agreement with the Westminster Assembly:

That "Adam was a public person, including all his posterity, and, consequently, that all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression,"...⁵²

Original sin is further described by Wesley as a state in which "our nature is deeply corrupted, inclined to evil, and disinclined to all that is spiritually good; so that, without supernatural grace, we can neither will nor do what is pleasing to God."⁵³ Wesley points out from experience that even children of "wise and virtuous parents"

daily evidenced the wrong state of all their faculties, both of their understanding, will and affections; just contrary both to the examples and instructions of all that were round about them. Here, then, these wrong tempers were not owing to "the fault of careless and ungodly parents;" nor could be rationally accounted for, but by supposing those children to have a natural propensity to evil.⁵⁴

⁵¹Works, VI, 244.

⁵²Works, IX, 262.

⁵³Ibid., 273.

⁵⁴Ibid., 295.

In a sermon on Original Sin Wesley speaks passionately from the Reformed tradition on the theme of "total corruption:"

This, therefore, is the first grand distinguishing point between Heathenism and Christianity. The one acknowledges that many men are infected with many vices, and even born with a proneness to them; but supposes withal, that in some the natural good much over-balances the evil: The other declares that all men are "conceived in sin," and "shapen in wickedness;" -- that hence there is in every man a "carnal mind, which is enmity against God, which is not, and cannot be, subject to" his "law;" and which so infects the whole soul, that "there dwelleth in" him, "in his flesh," in his natural state, "no good thing;" but "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil," only evil, and that "continually."⁵⁵

The precise interpretation of Wesley's doctrine of "total depravity" has been an issue of contention among Wesleyan scholars. Of paramount concern are the anthropological ramifications of Wesley's disavowal of the Calvinistic doctrine of election. George C. Cell is well known for his position that "The Wesleyan doctrine of saving faith ... is a complete renewal of the Luther-Calvin thesis that in the thought of salvation God is everything, man is nothing."⁵⁶ William R. Cannon agrees with the intent behind Cell's Calvinistic interpretation of Wesley, i.e., to show man's absolute dependence on divine grace, but he maintains that Cell has gone too far.⁵⁷ Cannon demonstrates that Wesley's repudiation of the

⁵⁵Works, VI, 63.

⁵⁶George C. Cell, The Rediscovery of John Wesley (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1935), 245.

⁵⁷Cannon, op. cit., p. 105 ff.

Calvinistic doctrine of predestination has consequences for the understanding of man's role in his own salvation; "it shifts the balance from an emphasis in which irresistible grace is supreme to one in which human response comes to occupy the chief position."⁵⁸, 59

A clearly nuanced presentation of Wesley's doctrine of "total depravity" is offered by Colin W. Williams.⁶⁰ He insists that the Wesleyan doctrine of man's corruption through sin must be seen as "describing man's condition before God."⁶¹ While the Fall entails the complete loss of the moral image of God, the natural image and the political image are weakened but not destroyed. However, Williams goes on to point out that for Wesley it is the moral image of God in man which distinguishes him from the animal world, since Wesley did not accept reason or understanding to be the decisive factors of differentiation.

The real image is that "man is capable of God;" that he is made for personal relationship with his Creator. The meaning of the Fall is that man has fallen away from this relationship, so losing his original righteousness and totally distorting the meaning of his existence."⁶²

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 106.

⁵⁹The "synergism" implied in this view of Wesley's thought will be considered in detail in connection with the doctrine of prevenient grace in the following chapter.

⁶⁰Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960) p. 48ff.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 48.

⁶²Ibid., p. 48.

Man is distinguished from all lesser creatures as being capax Dei. The loss of this religious dimension means the loss of his distinctive trait as man.

Original sin then reaches to the core of man, and this is the basis for the doctrine of "total depravity." But Wesley's deep awareness of this fact cannot be divorced from his deeper appreciation of the fact that the final word is one of salvation and not of damnation. In this sense Wesley could almost speak of the Fall as a felix culpa. In his sermon on God's Love to Fallen Man he highlights the great blessings that have come to man through God's permission of the Fall.

He (God) saw that to permit the fall of the first man was far best for mankind in general; that abundantly more good than evil would accrue to the posterity of Adam by his fall; that if "sin abounded" thereby over all the earth, yet grace "would much more abound;"⁶³

By far the greatest blessing is God's gift of his Son to be our Redeemer:

For if Adam had not fallen, Christ had not died . . . Do you not see that this was the very ground of his coming into the world? . . . Was it not to remedy this very thing that the "Word was made flesh," that "as in Adam all died, so in Christ all" might "be made alive?"⁶⁴

⁶³Works, VI, 232.

⁶⁴Ibid., 233.

NATURAL MAN: SINFUL MAN

Wesley's doctrine of original sin, as we have seen, "goes all the way with Calvin, with Luther, and with Augustine in his insistence that man is by nature totally destitute of righteousness and subject to the judgment and wrath of God."⁶⁵ It remains, however, for us to consider some of the distinctively Wesleyan teaching on the subject of sinful man.

First of all, Wesley uses the terms "natural man" and "fallen man" interchangeably. In his sermon on The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption he gives a "plain account of the three-fold state of man, the natural, the legal, and the evangelical . . ."⁶⁶ People do not necessarily fall neatly into any one of the three states. The man who neither fears nor loves God is the "natural" man. Wesley describes him in terms of sleep: "For his soul is in a deep sleep: His spiritual senses are not awake: They discern neither spiritual good nor evil."⁶⁷ Natural man, then, is fallen man, dulled into spiritual insensitivity by sin. "Legal" man is described in terms of an awakening to a consciousness of sin and his inability to do anything about it. This is the intermediate state -- the state of fear of God. Finally, the "evangelical" man is the one who lives by grace in the love of God.

⁶⁵Cannon, op. cit., p. 200.

⁶⁶Works, V, 108.

⁶⁷Ibid., 99.

Throughout his writings Wesley always describes "natural man" in terms of his sinful corruption or depravity; ". . . concerning man in his natural state, unassisted by the grace of God, . . . 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is' still 'evil, only evil,' and that 'continually'"⁶⁸ Roman Catholic theology also speaks of "natural man," or, to be more precise, man in a state of "pure nature." Man in a state of "pure nature," however, does not refer to sinful or fallen man. The concept of "pure nature" is employed to protect the gratuity of grace, and it refers to merely an hypothetical state of man, i.e., what man would be like had he never been called to the supernatural order. Man in a state of "pure nature," therefore would differ from fallen or sinful man sicut spoliatus a nudo. Granted, then, the basic difference between the Wesleyan and the Roman Catholic concepts, it is nevertheless interesting in relating them to observe that they do have one characteristic in common. Neither ever existed! They are both fictional!

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, (italics his) this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. (italics mine) No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience (italics his). But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace (italics his).⁶⁹

⁶⁸Works, VI, 58.

⁶⁹Ibid., 512.

In the passage quoted above we find the distinctively Wesleyan interpretation of the condition of man. The Reformed outlook is evidenced in the pessimistic picture of "natural man," but the universalism of his appreciation of grace is manifested in his doctrine of preventing grace.⁷⁰

Wesley further describes the "natural man" as constituted of body and soul; thus his interpretation of St. Paul's words: ". . .and may the whole of you, the spirit, and the soul, and the body, be preserved blameless unto the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁷¹

Just before he (Paul) said "you," now he denominates them from their spiritual state, the spirit, (Gal. 6:8); wishing that it may be preserved whole and entire; then from their natural state, the soul and the body, (for these two make up the whole nature of man, Matt. 10:28), wishing it may be preserved blameless till the coming of Christ. To explain this a little further; of the three here mentioned, only the two last are the natural, constituent parts of man. The first is adventitious, and the supernatural gift of God, to be found in Christians only.⁷²

The "natural man" is body and soul, but the Pauline anthropological categories of "flesh" and "spirit" do not coincide with the natural parts of man. Wesley correctly

⁷⁰The next chapter of this study will take up this particular doctrine at greater length. For the moment let us continue our consideration of "natural man."

⁷¹I Thessalonians 5:23.

⁷²Notes, p. 532.

interprets these biblical categories in their religious, not the philosophical, sense.⁷³

Some of the works here (in Galatians) mentioned are wrought principally, if not entirely, in the mind. And yet they are called "works of the flesh." -- Hence it is clear the apostle does not by the flesh mean the body, or sensual appetites and inclinations only, but the corruption of human nature, as it spreads through all the powers of the soul, as well as the members of the body: . . .⁷⁴

The corruption of man is made manifest in actual or personal sins. Original sin remains the root of all personal sin:

Such is the inbred corruption of thy heart, of thy very inmost nature. And what manner of branches canst thou expect to grow from such an evil root. Hence springs unbelief; . . .⁷⁵

In light of his personal mission Wesley constantly preached on the theme of individual responsibility for sin. As we have seen, he sought to combine this individualistic approach to sin with the collective notion of original or inherent sin.⁷⁶ Men must be convinced that sin abounds if they are to come to appreciate the fact that grace abounds still more.

⁷³cf. Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), p. 354 ff.

⁷⁴Notes, p. 485; on Gal. 5:21. Cf. Works, V, 88.

⁷⁵Works, V, 82.

⁷⁶cf. Harold Lindstrom, Wesley and Sanctification (Stockholm: Nya Bokforlags Aktiebolaget, 1946), p. 35 ff.

Sin, as it works itself out in the individual's life, does so mainly through pride, self will, and love of the world. The love of the world consists of the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. Because men are sinners we have these social evils of war, slavery, the liquor trade, unfair business methods, and harmful economic practices. Man's greatest trouble is sin, and his greatest need is deliverance from sin.⁷⁷

MAN UNDER GRACE

"Original Sin, Justification by Faith, Holiness of Heart and Life are the three cardinal doctrines of Christianity."⁷⁸ Having surveyed the first of these, we now turn to the second and third. The point to be made here is that Wesley's infralapsarian pessimism must be situated (as we have already mentioned in regard to the "fictional" concept of the "natural man") within the wider context of his soteriological concern to preach the universality of grace. "In contradistinction to the Calvinistic conception of limited grace, Wesley proposes his doctrine of universal grace free for all and free in all."⁷⁹ In his sermon on Working out our own Salvation he gives us a good overview of the plan of salvation as it is to be realized in each individual:

⁷⁷Charles W. Boleyn, John Wesley's View of Man (Unpublished Master's Dissertation: Union Theological Seminary, 1941), p. 49.

⁷⁸Letters, IV, p. 146, 237.

⁷⁹Cannon, op. cit., p. 100.

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture called repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby "through grace," we "are saved by faith"; consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.⁸⁰

It is Wesley's understanding of preventing grace, as we shall see in the following chapter, that gives him an evaluation of man's state before justification which is quite different from the traditional Protestant outlook. His emphasis on repentance before faith (where possible) is reminiscent of the Tridentine doctrine on "salutary acts" preceding justification.⁸¹ In the minutes of the first Methodist Conference (1744) we read --

But must not repentance and works meet for repentance go before faith? Without doubt; if by repentance you mean conviction of sin; and by works meet for repentance, obeying God as far as we can, forgiving our brother, leaving off from evil, doing good, and using his ordinances, according to the power we have received.⁸²

⁸⁰Works, VI, 509.

⁸¹H. Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum (the 31st Edition, 1960), p. 286 (numbers 797, 798).

⁸²Works, VIII, 275-6.

If repentance is the "porch", the "door of religion" is justification.⁸³ For Wesley the importance of this stage in the process of salvation is obvious -- justification is "pardon, the forgiveness of sins."⁸⁴ God forgives our sins because of the Atonement made by Christ; the ground of our justification is the redemptive work of Christ. Although he supposes himself to be in disagreement with the Church of Rome in this regard, Wesley in fact uses almost the same terminology as the Council of Trent:

The human righteousness of Christ, at least the imputation of it, as the whole and sole meritorious cause of the justification of a sinner before God, is likewise denied by the members of the Church of Rome; by all of them who are true to the principles of their own Church.⁸⁵

By the phrase, "the imputation of Christ's righteousness," Wesley simply means that "All believers are forgiven and accepted, not for the sake of anything in them, or of anything that ever was, that is, or ever can be done by them, but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them."⁸⁶ In this sense the "imputation of Christ's righteousness" seems to be a way of saying that it is Christ's merits and not ours that justify us. Hence, the above passage is really a misinterpretation

⁸³Letters, II, 268.

⁸⁴Works, V, 57.

⁸⁵Ibid., 242. cf. Denziger, op. cit., p. 287, no. 799.

⁸⁶Ibid., 242.

of the doctrine of Trent. In fact, Trent says the same thing.⁸⁷

On man's part the only necessary condition of justification is faith which is the gift of God. Wesley explains what he means by this:

We mean thereby this much, that it is the only thing without which none is justified; the only thing that is immediately, indispensably, absolutely requisite in order to pardon. As, on the one hand, though a man should have everything else without faith, yet he cannot be justified; so, on the other, though he be supposed to want everything else, yet if he hath faith, he cannot but be justified.⁸⁸

Justification, however, in the sense of forgiveness of sin is only one side of the transformation of the sinner. Wesley's faith in the "imputed righteousness of Christ" finds room for belief in "inherent righteousness."⁸⁹

But do not you believe inherent righteousness? Yes, in its proper place; not as the ground of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of imputed righteousness, but as consequent upon it. I believe "Jesus Christ is made of God unto us sanctification," as well as "righteousness;" or that God sanctifies, as well as justifies, all them that believe in him. They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed, are made righteous by the Spirit of Christ; are renewed in the image of God, "after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness."⁹⁰

⁸⁷H. Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum, p. 287, no. 799.

⁸⁸Works, V, 62.

⁸⁹cf. Denzinger, op. cit., p. 288, no. 800.

⁹⁰Works, V. 241.

The word, justification, has, therefore, a wider meaning.

In the wide sense it includes our regeneration or new birth:

This then is the salvation which is through faith, even in the present world: A salvation from sin, and the consequences of sin, both often expressed in the word justification; which, taken in the largest sense, implies a deliverance from guilt and punishment, by the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing on him, and a deliverance from the power of sin, through Christ formed in his heart. So that he who is thus justified, or saved by faith, is indeed born again. He is born again of the Spirit unto a new life, which "is hid with Christ in God."⁹¹

In general, however, Wesley uses the term, justification, in the strict sense of forgiveness of sin; the regeneration of the sinner is called sanctification, which begins with the new birth. While justification refers to an objective change in man's relation to God through the imputation of Christ's merits, the new birth or sanctification connotes a subjective change in man himself through a real inherent righteousness.⁹²

But though it be allowed, that justification and the new birth are, in point of time, inseparable from each other, yet they are easily distinguished, as being not the same, but things of a widely different nature. Justification implies only a relative, the new birth a real, change. (*italics mine*) God in justifying us does something for us; in begetting us again, He does the work in us. (*italics his*). The former changes our

⁹¹*Ibid.*, II-2 (*italics his*).

⁹²*cf. Lindström, op. cit.*, p. 84.

outward relation to God, so that of enemies we become children; by the latter our inmost souls are changed, so that of sinners we become saints. The one restores us to the favour, the other to the image, of God. The one is the taking away of the guilt, the other the taking away the power, of sin: so that, although they are joined together in point of time, yet are they of wholly distinct natures.⁹³

Since the new birth is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, He Himself bears witness to our reconciliation with God. This is the Wesleyan doctrine of "assurance." "God gives us at new birth the spirit whereby we are able to perceive his Spirit."⁹⁴

By the testimony of the Spirit, I mean, an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.⁹⁵

At first Wesley felt that this assurance is necessary for salvation. He later changed this opinion.⁹⁶

In describing the process of salvation Wesley balances his emphasis on gradual development with an acute awareness of the instantaneous element. The latter refers to the divine interventions in the various stages toward final salvation.

⁹³Works, V, 223-4.

⁹⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 105-6.

⁹⁵Works, V, 124-5.

⁹⁶cf. Williams, op. cit., p. 122 ff.

Nowhere is this combination of the gradual and the instantaneous more clearly evident than in Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification or Christian perfection. After the new birth a higher stage awaits the Christian. In the regenerate sin is no longer in dominion, but its root -- original sin -- is still present.⁹⁷

There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul, the flesh and the Spirit Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil.⁹⁸

Wesley continues this line of thought in explaining the need of repentance in believers.⁹⁹ The justified must "work out their salvation: by living virtuously and by using the "means of grace."¹⁰⁰ God will lead them in time to entire sanctification:

⁹⁷cf. Works, V, 145.

The new birth delivers man from the power of sin, but only in entire sanctification does man experience a "total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God." (Works, XI, 401) Thus, the root of sin, i.e., original sin (cf. Lindstrom, p. 144) remains in regenerate man prior to his complete sanctification. It seems to me that Wesley's notion of original sin in this connection is similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of "concupiscence" which remains in the justified as a remnant of sin.

⁹⁸Works, V, 155.

⁹⁹Ibid., 156 ff.

¹⁰⁰cf. Works, V, 185 ff.

"Well, but what more than this (the new birth) can be implied in entire sanctification?" It does not imply any new kind of holiness: Let no man imagine this. From the moment we are justified, till we give up our spirits to God, love is the fulfilling of the law; Love is the sum of Christian sanctification; it is the one kind of holiness, which is found, only in various degrees in the believers who are distinguished by St. John into "little children, young men, and fathers." The difference between one and the other properly lied in the degree of love.¹⁰¹

Wesley believed that entire sanctification is "commonly, if not always, an instantaneous work."¹⁰² Liberation from original sin and thus the complete restoration of the image of God comes with entire sanctification.¹⁰³ While Wesley affirms that Christians are called to perfection in love, this perfection, because of the infirmities of this life (especially ignorance and inadvertence), cannot be absolute, i.e., the perfect fulfillment of the total moral law.¹⁰⁴ In the new dispensation, however, God no longer demands this; "relative perfection" is synonymous with "scriptural perfection."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹Works, VI, 488 (*italics his*).

¹⁰²Ibid., 491.

¹⁰³cf. Works, V, 165.

¹⁰⁴cf. Works, VI, 2 ff.

¹⁰⁵cf. Lindström, op. cit., p. 149 ff.

Wesleyan scholars agree that John Wesley's doctrine of sanctification or perfection is a more or less drastic modification of the classical position of the reformation.

The real distinction between the two points of view lies -- more than anywhere else, it seems to me -- in the religious motive which prompts the use of the word "righteousness" and which assigns all Christian development either to a process prior to its attainment, as in the case of the Reformers, or to a process subsequent to its attainment, as in the case of Wesley.¹⁰⁶

The difference between these two points of view is obvious in the different conclusions they respectively lead to: "The Wesleyan system of ethics, therefore, stands in contrast to the systems of Luther and of Calvin in that it is an ethics of realization, not of aspiration."¹⁰⁷ As Harold Lindström remarks in his famous study of the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification:

To Wesley perfection was an attainable and higher stage in the Christian life after forgiveness and new birth. To Luther on the other hand forgiveness, which at the same time meant the transformation of man, was in itself the highest expression of the Christian life. He saw the ethical change of man's will as an incomplete beginning. Morally, that is, the believer was never perfect in this life; though he could be entirely righteous in the sense that he had received forgiveness in faith and been delivered from the sentence and punishment of sin. To the Reformers perfection was perfection in faith, but to Wesley it was an inherent ethical perfection in love and obedience. . . .

¹⁰⁶Cannon, op. cit., p. 223 (*italics his*).

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 225 (*italics mine*).

Both Calvin and Luther thought inherent ethical perfection came only with death, Wesley that entire sanctification could be realized during life on earth.¹⁰⁸

The doctrine of Christian perfection is the heart of Wesleyan Methodism: "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."¹⁰⁹

We have considered by way of an overview the religious anthropology of John Wesley within the framework of man as the image of God, lost and restored. We have seen that the image of God was lost with original sin but is recovered with entire sanctification. However, God never leaves man without his grace.¹¹⁰

As a fitting closing of this chapter, let us ponder the words of Herbert Richardson in a special issue of Commonweal devoted to the topic of the Holy Spirit; here is a tribute worthy of John Wesley's doctrine of perfection:

The true Protestant reformation -- a reformation of the Church which also requires the reformation and sanctification of the world -- took place in the eighteenth century. Wesley and Edwards -- rather than Luther and Calvin -- were its prophets. The sixteenth century "reformation" never found a new positive principle of holiness. . . . Wesley's personal experience and Scriptural studies led him to the conviction that the period of God's

¹⁰⁸Lindström, op. cit., p. 136-7.

¹⁰⁹Letter of 15 Sept. 1790; quoted from Lindström, p. 126.

¹¹⁰The next chapter will take up this theme under the heading of "prevenient grace."

adminstrating the world through law had been brought to an end by Christ, and that God now was working to recreate a new humanity by the power of the Spirit. The key to this transformation in the life of an individual man is his being "born again," a total phychological reconstruction that roots out the effects of original sin -- namely, death, and the fear of death -- and makes possible, in principle, the living of a perfect life.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Herbert Richardson, "Holy Spirit and Protestantism," Commonweal ("Commonweal Papers: 3"), LXXXIX, 6 (Nov. 8, 1968), p. 196.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN WESLEY'S "PREVENIENT GRACE" AND KARL RAHNER'S "SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL"

We come now to the heart of our present study. This chapter will present in some detail one important feature of Wesley's Christian anthropology -- his doctrine of prevenient (or preventing) grace. The ecumenical significance of this doctrine vis-a-vis contemporary Roman Catholic thought will be investigated in the light of Karl Rahner's theology of the "supernatural existential." To ascertain what degree of similarity might exist between these two conceptions of man prior to justification the approach of this chapter will be a consideration of both positions under the following headings: their background and context, a theological explanation of their meaning, their Christological (or soteriological) bases, and their "universalism" as Christian interpretations of the preliminary religious condition of all men. In the light of this investigation the final conclusions of the present study will be formulated.

Wesley's positive appraisal of man in a context of grace prior to the forgiving grace of justification has led scholars to see in his fundamental religious anthropology a decidedly

Catholic dimension.¹ It is the "Catholic" tone of the doctrine on prevenient grace as distinct from the Calvinistic limitation of grace to the elect that grounds the other similarities between the Wesleyan and Catholic theologies of grace. To substantiate this thesis the following parallel presentation of Wesley and Rahner is proffered.

1. John Wesley and "prevenient grace":

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In order to appreciate the unique features of Wesley's doctrine on prevenient grace it is necessary to situate this particular concept within the general religious atmosphere of the England of his theological formation and later ministry. Only then can we understand how Wesley's interpretation of this doctrine is an original theological contribution.

While "the early Anglicans had been 'Calvinistic,' . . . in the eighteenth century that fact seemed a little incredible to members of this Church."² By the end of the seventeenth century Calvinism had been "eclipsed"³ in England. The dominant

¹cf. Lee, op. cit., pp. 126-7.

²Roland N. Stromberg, Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth Century England. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 110.

³G. R. Cragg, From Puritanism to the Age of Reason: A Study of Changes in Religious Thought Within the Church of England, 1660-1700 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), cf. chapter on "The Eclipse of Calvinism".

religious influence within the official Church of the eighteenth century has traditionally been characterized as "Arminianism."

Originating as a term referring to the writings of the late sixteenth century Dutch theologian, James van Harman (commonly known as Arminius), "Arminianism" has been employed rather indiscriminately to cover a broad range of quite diverse entities.⁴ When it is used to describe Anglican high churchmanship of the eighteenth century, Arminianism does have a more precise connotation. When it is claimed that "Arminianism in its milder form permeated this era,"⁵ the phrase, "in its milder form," refers to the genuine doctrine of Arminius himself as an attempt to steer a middle course between Calvinism and Pelagianism.⁶ While the various and diverse meanings attached to Arminianism have often led to a distortion of the image of Arminius himself, for the sake of some clarity it can be said that "the common thread through the sundry strands of Arminianism is dissent from some form of Calvinism."⁷ For further clarity we must await a reassessment of the theology of Arminius as a positive force within the history of Protestant thought, the need for which has recently been recognized.⁸

⁴Carl Bangs, "Arminius and the Reformation," Church History, XXX (1961), p. 155.

⁵Stromberg, op. cit., p. 110.

⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁷Bangs, op. cit., p. 155.

⁸The Methodists marked the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of Arminius' birth by a special issue of the London Quarterly and Holborn Review (1960) dedicated to his thought.

Since Wesley was trained in High Church Arminianism,⁹ some account must now be given of the influence of Arminius on Wesleyan theology. As we shall see, Wesley not only followed Arminius in repudiating rigid Calvinism; he actually went further than Arminius in formulating his own anti-Calvinist position.¹⁰

Arminius' theology of grace differs from Calvinism in several important points. While he attributes to grace "the commencement, the continuance, and the consummation of all good,"¹¹ he considers the scope of grace to be universal and the action of grace to be resistible¹² (thereby denying predestinationism) -- and fundamentally, he holds for a restoration of free will to fallen man through grace.¹³

⁹cf. Lee, op. cit., pp. 120-1.

¹⁰cf. Cannon, op. cit., p. 102.

¹¹F. Stuart Clarke, "The Theology of Arminius," The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 185 (1960), 248-53.

¹²Ibid., p. 250; In his defense of the universal scope of grace Arminius mentions "preventing grace" as leading to faith and "subsequent grace" leading to perseverance: cf. Bangs, op. cit., p. 167.

¹³cf. Alfred H. Pask, "The Influence of Arminius on John Wesley," The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 185 (1960), 258-63; With regard to the Dutch Remonstrants with whom Arminius is identified it is interesting to note that ". . . there were similarities between the Dutch Remonstrance and the decrees of the Council of Trent in their teachings on the freedom of the will"; cf. Gordon S. Wakefield, "Arminianism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 185 (1960), 254.

The spread of these ideas in Holland soon brought the Arminians into conflict with the Calvinists. In 1618-19 the Synod of Dort convened not for "free and open theological discussion, but the affirmation of Calvinist principles and the discomfiture of the Arminians."¹⁴ Around this time Arminianism was introduced into England by "some intellectual traffic" between the two countries "through the persecuted Dutch Arminians who sought refuge in England."¹⁵ In time the word "Arminian" became less a theological term than a party label; the Puritans, who were mostly Calvinists, used it to derisively describe the Bishops and the official Anglican Church.¹⁶

Educated for the ministry in the Church of England, Wesley was necessarily affected by Arminian thought. While he never explicitly states that he read the works of Arminius, there is evidence to support the assumption that he "must have read something from the pen of Arminius himself."¹⁷ As a general assessment, Wesley's "Arminian views" can be stated as his acceptance of the "leading principles of Arminius," which were "the universality of the benefit of the Atonement and a restored freedom of the will . . ."¹⁸ In a short essay in defense of

¹⁴Wakefield, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁶cf. Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁷Pask, op. cit., p. 261.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 260.

Arminianism Wesley commits himself in support of the Arminian position on a "conditional" predestination as against the Calvinistic insistence on "absolute" predestination.¹⁹

While the "leading principles" of Arminius provided Wesley with the background for the overall tone of his theology, the obvious source for his notion of "prevenient grace" (through which he would develop his unique contribution beyond Arminius) is the broad heritage of Christian tradition. The concept of prevenient grace had been part of Western Theological vocabulary since the time of Augustine.²⁰ It had consistently been employed in formulating the orthodox response to any form of Pelagianism which might deny the divine initiative in man's salvation.²¹ In Article X of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England Wesley found his official source for the doctrine of prevenient grace:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God: Wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God,

¹⁹cf. Works, X, 360.

²⁰St. Augustine, De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum, PL XL; De natura et gratia, XXXI, De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio, XVII in PL XLIV.

²¹cf. St. Thomas, Summa, I-II, q. 111, a. 3. For Trent's usage cf. The Church Teaches (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955) #1525.

without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.²²

It is interesting to note that the context for the Article's teaching on prevenient grace is the question of free will. "We need 'the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will.' This is usually called 'prevenient' grace, i.e., grace that goes before (praevenire) or prevents us."²³ In the following section we will investigate Wesley's unique interpretation of this doctrine.

The context for Wesley's development of his theology on prevenient grace was his disagreement with extreme Calvinism on the doctrine of predestination. The soteriological setting of Wesley's religious anthropology is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in his doctrine of prevenient grace. Reacting against the Calvinistic conception of election with its consequent limitation of grace to the few for whom grace is necessarily irresistible, Wesley formulated his faith in the universal salvific will of God in terms of prevenient grace whereby "there is no man . . . that is wholly void of the grace of god."²⁴

²²E. J. Bicknell, A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (London: Longman, Green & Co. 1919, new impression, 1953), p. 219.

²³Ibid., p. 243.

²⁴Works, VI, 512.

THE NATURE OF PREVENIENT GRACE IN WESLEY

We have already seen that for Wesley no man is born in a state of mere nature.²⁵ Deeply inspired by his personal appreciation of the universal scope of God's grace in Christ, Wesley gave his life to convince others of this gospel. One with the sixteenth century Reformers in regard to the depravity of the natural man, he nevertheless departed from them in his attempt to balance the pessimism of nature with a real optimism of grace. For Wesley the doctrine of original sin cannot be separated from the doctrine of prevenient grace. From the beginning grace "abounds more" than sin. Nowhere does Wesley define prevenient grace as such. Instead, he describes the benefits accorded to man through this preliminary grace in terms of conscience, the knowledge of God, free will, and the beginning of salvation.

In his teaching on grace Wesley considered himself an Arminian²⁶ even though he admits to being "within a hair's breadth of Calvinism"²⁷ in regard to his theology of justification. Arminius himself, as we have seen, was a Calvinist whose study of theology led him to reject the extreme Calvinistic views on predestination. "True, God has decreed, according to Arminius,

²⁵cf. supra, p. 68.

²⁶cf. Works, X, 278-9.

²⁷Works, VIII, 284.

concerning man's salvation; but the nature of that decree is not such as to limit the offer of salvation but rather to extend the offer and to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner the means which are necessary to repentance and faith to all men."²⁸ Arminius is quite orthodox in ascribing every good work to the grace of God. "But the big point is that (for Arminius) man can be without grace and that the reason he is without it is due to himself and not to God. . . . man does have the power to accept or to reject grace when it is offered to him."²⁹

Agreeing with Arminius in rejecting predestinationism, Wesley goes further than the Dutch theologian in affirming his own position. No man is ever without grace, because prevenient grace is given to every man born into this world. Every man is born with a conscience, and this is a supernatural gift of prevenient grace:

Can it be denied that something of this (conscience) is found in every man born into the world? And does it not appear as soon as the understanding opens, as soon as reason begins to dawn? Does not every one then begin to know that there is a difference between good and evil; how imperfect soever the various circumstances of this sense of good and evil may be? . . . This faculty seems to be what is usually meant by those who speak of natural conscience; an expression frequently

²⁸Cannon, op. cit., pp. 101-2.

²⁹Ibid., p. 102 (italics his).

found in some of our best authors, but yet not strictly just. For though in one sense it may be termed natural, because it is found in all men; yet, properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments. No; it is not nature, but the Son of God, that is "the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world." So that we may say to every human creature, "He," not nature, "hath showed thee, O man, what is good." And it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.³⁰

From this passage we learn that prevenient grace manifests itself through conscience whereby Christ enlightens man about good and evil and disturbs man about his sinful situation. To answer the possible charge that "twentieth century readers" may see little difference between the doctrine of prevenient grace and a doctrine of "natural ability" Umphrey Lee remarks:

By the doctrine of prevenient grace two important truths could be preserved. In the first place proper emphasis could be laid upon man's proneness to evil, a proneness which modern man, aware of social imperfections and of man's instinctive tendencies, will be the last to deny. In the second place, the divine initiative could be safeguarded.³¹

While all men are born with prevenient grace, this supernatural gift is not bestowed equally on all. Wesley makes this affirmation but does not really explain it:

³⁰Works, VII, 187-8.

³¹Lee, op. cit., p. 125.

Every man has a greater or less measure of this (prevenient grace), which waiteth not for the call of man. Every one has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Every one has some measure of that light, some glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world.³²

This prevenient grace can be increased by God's gift.

For instance, God can work this increase through the "means of grace" by which Wesley means all "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."³³

Conscience, the gift of prevenient grace, has a "three-fold office" according to Wesley:

First. It is a witness, --testifying what we have done, in thought, word, or action. Secondly. It is a judge --passing sentence on what we have done, that it is good or evil. And, Thirdly, it, in some sort, executes the sentence, by occasioning a degree of complacency in him that does well, and a degree of uneasiness in him that does evil.³⁴

The testimony and the judgment of conscience are functions of man's supernaturally given "moral sense."³⁵ This moral

³²Works, VI, 512.

³³Works, V, 187.

³⁴Works, VII, 188.

³⁵Ibid., 189.

sense in turn reflects the presence in all men of the moral law inscribed on their hearts through the prevenient grace of Christ the Light.³⁶

Conscience is placed in the middle, under God and above man. It is a kind of silent reasoning of the mind, whereby those things which are judged to be right are approved of with pleasure; but those which are judged evil are disapproved of with uneasiness. This is a tribunal in the breast of men, to accuse sinners, and excuse them that do well.³⁷

Through prevenient grace, then, the moral law makes known its demands by the promptings of the light of conscience. Consequently, the question arises whether or not man can come to any knowledge about God, the author of the moral law. Wesley's doctrine of the total corruption of the natural man rules out the possibility of any purely natural knowledge about God. First of all, Wesley denies any innate idea of God:

. . . the truth is, no man ever did, or does now, find any such idea stamped upon his soul. The little which we do know of God, . . . we do not gather from any inward impression, but gradually acquire from without. "The invisible things of God," if they are known at all, "are known from the things that are made"; not from what God hath written in our hearts, but from what he hath written in all his works.³⁸

Taken at face value, the above passage might lead one to believe that Wesley affirmed the natural knowability of God

³⁶cf. Works, V, 136.

³⁷Works, VII, 187.

³⁸Works, VI, 339.

"from the things that are made." Philosophically, he agreed with Locke on the genesis of human knowledge. Remarking on Locke's Essay on Human Understanding, Wesley states that Locke has proved "that all our ideas come from sensation or reflection."³⁹ In accord with this position Wesley does admit that we can come to a knowledge of God's existence from His creation:

It is true, as soon as we came to the use of reason, we learned "the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead, from the things that are made." From the things that are seen we inferred the existence of an eternal, powerful Being, that is not seen.⁴⁰

Obviously, then, man can reason to a knowledge of God from the works of creation. However, Wesley explicitly corrects any misunderstanding that may arise from a reading of these texts as supporting the thesis of a natural theology: "I believe all "the light of nature," so called, to flow from preventing Grace."⁴¹ For Wesley even what Catholic doctrine calls the "natural knowledge of God" (as distinct from the saving knowledge of faith) is attainable by man only through the gift of prevenient grace.

We might describe the benefits of prevenient grace discussed so far as within the broad category of knowledge.

³⁹Works, XIII, 456.

⁴⁰Works, VI, 58.

⁴¹A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, V, p. 211; cf. Notes on Rom. 1:19 and John 1:9.

To complete this picture an account must now be given of the preliminary blessings of grace accorded to man's will and activity. The questions before us here concern the relationship of prevenient grace to free will, to the value of works prior to justification, and to the problem of synergism.

Wesley's acceptance of prevenient grace was the basis⁴² for his gradual departure from the wholly negative evaluation of works done before justification. As he came to appreciate the need for repentance before justifying faith, Wesley became more and more dissatisfied with Article XIII of the Thirty-nine Articles on "Good Works. Before Justification:"

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity; yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin.⁴³

In 1784 in preparing a revised edition of the Articles for American Methodists he omitted Article XIII entirely.⁴⁴

Classical Portestant theology had considered the role of man in his own justification as one of passive acceptance.

"It is an act performed for him and, to be sure, has its effects in him; and yet, as regards the precipitating cause of its

⁴²cf. Cannon, op. cit., p. 107.

⁴³Bicknell, op. cit., p. 265.

⁴⁴Nolan B. Harmon & John W. Bardsley, "John Wesley and the Articles of Religion," Religion in Life, XXII (1952-53), p. 285.

execution, it is totally divorced from him."⁴⁵ Wesley, however, in the light of his concept of prevenient grace, assigns man a positive role in his own justification:

If God were to save men by his power alone, by his irresistible decree, this would imply no wisdom at all. But his wisdom is shown by his saving man in such a manner as not to destroy his nature, not to take away the liberty which he has given him.⁴⁶

Man's response to God's grace must be free. But whence comes this freedom if man is totally corrupt? Wesley finds the answer in his idea of prevenient grace:

Natural free-will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which "enlightens every man that cometh into the world."⁴⁷

Wesley expresses here a lack of concern about "natural free-will" because of his belief that no man is in a natural state. Man can freely respond to God because God has supernaturally restored a degree of human freedom through grace. Thus, "in no sense is this freedom considered to be, as with Pelagius, the exercise of man's undamaged natural faculties."⁴⁸ Human freedom -- liberum arbitrium -- is the gift of God's grace.

⁴⁵Cannon, op. cit., p. 104.

⁴⁶Works, VI, 326.

⁴⁷Works, X, 229-30.

⁴⁸Starkey, op. cit., p. 119; cf. Henry C. Granville, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Free Will," The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 185 (1960), 200-4.

Since prevenient grace enables men to freely respond to God, Wesley exhorts his followers to "work out their salvation":

If God worketh in you, then work out your own salvation . . .⁴⁹

You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.⁵⁰

God worketh in you; therefore you can work . . .⁵¹

Man's grace-given ability to respond to the work of God in him leads Wesley to take up explicitly the question of "works before justification." In the Minutes of 1745 we read:

Q.7. Have we duly considered the case of Cornelius? Was not he in the favor of God, when "his prayers and alms came up for a memorial before God:" that is, before he believed in Christ?

A. It does seem that he was, in some degree. But we speak not of those who have not heard the gospel.

Q.8. But were not those works of his "splendid sins?"

A. No; nor were they done without the grace of Christ.⁵²

In regard to this text Colin Williams points out that "the reason for Wesley's dissatisfaction with the traditional Protestant statement of man's condition before justification lies in his emphasis upon Christ working by prevenient grace in the

⁴⁹Works, VI, 509.

⁵⁰Ibid., 513.

⁵¹Ibid., 511.

⁵²Works, VIII, 283.

life even of those who have not heard the gospel."⁵³ Williams is careful to note, however, that these works prior to justification are good not by "the test of objective moral standards," but by "the test of inward response to the prevenient grace of God."⁵⁴ In support of this interpretation he cites the next question and answer of the Minutes:

Q.9 How then can we maintain, that all works done before we have a sense of the pardoning love of God are sin, and, as such, an abomination to Him"

A. The works of him who has heard the gospel, and does not believe, are not done as God hath "willed and commanded them to be done." And yet we know not how to say that they are an abomination to the Lord in him who feareth God, and, from that principle, does the best he can.⁵⁵

It follows, then, that prevenient grace as the God-given stimulus to awaken man to a realization of his sinfulness is the basis for Wesley's distinctive teaching on "synergism." While there can be no question of a merely human (or "natural") cooperation with God in the working out of salvation, the gift of prevenient grace creates in man a supernatural ability to respond actively to God and, in this sense, to cooperate with Him. In denying the irresistibility of grace Wesley also affirms the possibility that man can reject the promptings of prevenient

⁵³Williams, op. cit., p. 60.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 60.

⁵⁵Works, VIII 283; as quoted by Williams, p. 60.

grace: ". . . no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."⁵⁶ With his free will restored by prevenient grace every man has the power either to refuse or to accept the divine initiative.

Wesleyan thought, therefore, is decidedly synergistic in its description of the operations prior to justification and essential to the bestowal of saving faith. There is a genuine cooperation of man with God.⁵⁷

Lycurgus Starkey sees the Wesleyan doctrine of man's cooperation with grace as a unification of the Protestant and Catholic traditions.⁵⁸ He calls this form of synergism "evangelical because it is predicated on a prior working of God's grace."⁵⁹ According to Starkey, Wesley differs from the Reformers in his positive evaluation of works prior to justification; he differs from "Tridentine Roman Catholicism" in not accepting the sacramental origin of prevenient grace in baptism and in rejecting the idea of merit in works done prior or subsequent to justification.⁶⁰

The above rather superficial comparison of Wesley and "Tridentine" Catholicism in the matter of prevenient grace calls

⁵⁶Works, VI, 512.

⁵⁷Cannon, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁸Starkey, op. cit., p. 120 ff.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 120.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 120.

to mind, by way of contrast, Hans Kung's excellent study of the Tridentine doctrine on grace and justification.⁶¹ Certain features of Kung's interpretation of Catholic doctrine can provide us with a most apposite summary of this section.

What Catholic theology traditionally refers to as the "natural knowledge of God" and "natural free will" Wesley views as gifts of the prevenient grace of Christ. Perhaps both are really saying the same thing! If we follow Kung in understanding the grace of Christ as always operative for man's welfare because of creation in Christ then also for Catholics even the "natural" continues to exist after and despite sin (which of itself would utterly destroy man) only because of redemption in Christ Jesus:

Jesus Christ, as the one significant prevenient grace (*gratia praeveniens*), prevents the annihilating work of sin. From eternity God has foreseen the fall of man and has taken precautions. And so the "enduring existence" of everything was committed by Him to Jesus Christ -- to Jesus Christ, precisely with a view to its redemption. Creation in Jesus Christ is not redemption but, as its prerequisite, it is the hidden beginning of redemption. This is the reason why, despite everything, God did not have to "repent" that He had created man. He doesn't have to "destroy him completely from the face of the earth," nor finally revoke His creation of man (cf. Gen. 6, 7, 13).⁶²

To continue this line of thought our next section will consider specifically the Christological foundation for the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace.

⁶¹Hans Kung, Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection, (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964).

⁶²Ibid., p. 162.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL BASIS FOR PREVENIENT GRACE

Wesleyan Christology might not inappropriately be titled, 'The Presupposed Christ'.⁶³ While Wesley does not develop an abstract Christology,⁶⁴ he does maintain that "nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of Atonement."⁶⁵ In terms of the Christology of Chalcedon Wesley emphasizes the divine nature of Christ over the human.⁶⁶ The soteriological consequences of this emphasis are evident in the fact that "the eternal generation is . . . important as a ground for Christ's pre-eminence and as the source of man's salvation."⁶⁷ Although Christ redeemed us in time, the effects of his salvific work are eternal: "Jesus Christ (yea, and his Gospel) are from everlasting to everlasting."⁶⁸ While Wesley "seems to dissolve time when looking at man's history from God's point of view,"⁶⁹ he does not "make Christ an eternal principle, and the incarnation unnecessary."⁷⁰ This Christological viewpoint, however, shows

⁶³Deschner, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶⁴cf. Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁵Letters, VI, 297-8.

⁶⁶cf. Deschner, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁸cf. Notes on Heb. 12:8; cf. Deschner, p. 39, fn. 5.

⁶⁹Deschner, p. 39, fn. 5.

⁷⁰Ibid.

that there is in Wesley an undeveloped tendency to "give Christ a different role in the plan of salvation than that of a 'remedy'."71

Although John Deschner describes Christ's work in creation as "non-mediatorial" (implying that creation is not a work of grace), he is not completely satisfied with this distinction.⁷² He points out that Wesley himself is ambivalent on this point, and concludes that "more substantial statements (of Wesley) explicitly ground creation in grace."⁷³ A perusal of Wesley's comments on the Christological creation texts of the New Testament support this conclusion.⁷⁴

For every Christian theologian the unique source of salvation is the redemptive work of Christ. If Wesley claims that no man is merely in his natural (corrupt) state because of God's gift of prevenient grace, then this grace, too, must be the initial benefit of the redemption:

I always did . . . clearly assert the total fall of man, and his utter inability to do any good of himself: the absolute necessity of the grace and Spirit of God to raise even a good thought or desire in our hearts: the Lord's rewarding no work, and accepting of none, but so far as they proceed from his

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Deschner, p. 65.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴cf. Notes on the Christological creation tests of the N.T.

preventing, convincing, and converting grace Thro' the Beloved. The blood and righteousness of Christ being the sole meritorious cause of our salvation.⁷⁵

Thus, prevenient grace is redemption's first gift to man. But this is not all -- the actual working of prevenient grace in man is commonly predicated of Christ, the Light. As we have seen, the moral law was partially re-inscribed on man's heart through prevenient grace.⁷⁶ Christ is the Light who reveals this law to man; the revealer of morality is not nature (for conscience is not "natural"), but the Son of God, that is "the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world."⁷⁷

If we take this (the salvific work of God) in its utmost extent, it will include all that is wrought in the soul, by what is frequently termed 'natural conscience,' but more properly 'preventing grace'; all the drawings of the Father -- the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that light wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world' -- showing every man to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God; all the convictions which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man -- . . .⁷⁸

⁷⁵as quoted in Lindström, op. cit., p. 212 (*italics mine*).

⁷⁶cf. Works, V, 436.

⁷⁷Works, VII, 188.

⁷⁸Works, VI, 44.

Insisting that all grace is soteriologically based (including prevenient grace), Wesley holds that the grace of Christ was given proleptically to all men before the historical Incarnation.⁷⁹

God did not despise the work of his own hands; but, being reconciled to man through the Son of His love, He, in some measure, re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature. He again showed thee, O man, what is good, although not as in the beginning, even to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

And this He showed, not only to our first parents, but likewise to all their posterity, by 'that true light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.'⁸⁰

It is precisely in this difficult question of the proleptic result of the redemption that Wesley's emphasis on Christ as the eternal Son of God has soteriological significance. God has given man grace from the beginning in anticipation of His "being reconciled to man through the Son of His love." The Son of God manifested himself throughout the history of salvation for "God the Father none hath seen, nor can see; from all eternity He hath dwelt in light inapproachable; and it is only in and by the Son of His love that He hath, at any time, revealed Himself to His creatures."⁸¹

⁷⁹cf. J. Weldon Smith, III, "Some Thoughts on Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace," Religion in Life, XXXIV (1964), p.75.

⁸⁰Works, V, 436.

⁸¹Works, VI, 272.

Wesley gives several instances of the manifestations of the Son in pre-Christian history.⁸² However, the primary role of the historical Incarnation must not be forgotten:

But all these (previous manifestations) were only types of his grand manifestation. It was in the fulness of time . . . that God "brought his first-begotten into the world, made of a woman," by the power of the Highest overshadowing her.⁸³

Wesley's Christological interpretation of creation with- in a context of grace soteriologically founded -- although not fully developed -- enables us to view his concept of prevenient grace in term of a continuity between the "orders" of creation and grace.⁸⁴ This broad horizon will provide us with a perspective for our following consideration of the universal scope of grace in Wesley.

THE UNIVERSAL SCOPE OF PREVENIENT GRACE

Several times throughout his life Wesley's views on the universal salvific will of God brought him into open conflict with Calvinists. While he suffered much from the acrimony of his opponents, in the long run these polemics served as a catalyst for his own theological development. Throughout this study we have noted how Wesley's anti-Calvinist stance with regard to

⁸²Ibid., 272-3.

⁸³Ibid., 272-3.

⁸⁴cf. Deschner, p. 65ff; Starkey, p. 39ff; Lindström, p. 49.

absolute predestinationism was the occasion for his somewhat radical departures from the received Protestantism of the sixteenth century. His personal contribution to this debate -- the preaching of "free grace for all" -- was to be a real advancement.⁸⁵

Grace for all is Wesley's answer to Calvinism. The work of Christ is not limited to a specified few who reap its benefits while the greater part of mankind inevitably perishes. God has invited all men to come unto him. One by one Wesley marshals his arguments against a limitation of the atonement to the elect and speaks out boldly for free, universal grace. Christ died for all, his offer of salvation is to all. If some men are not saved their lost condition must be charged, not to the divine will, but rather, to human willfulness.⁸⁶

In one of his most famous sermons, "Free Grace," Wesley speaks of the inspiration behind his optimism of grace:

How freely does God love the world! While we were yet sinners, 'Christ died for the ungodly.' While we were 'dead in sin,' God 'spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all.' And how freely with him does he 'give us all things!' Verily, FREE GRACE is all in all! The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR ALL.⁸⁷

⁸⁵cf. Robert E. Cushman, "Salvation for All: Wesley and Calvinism," in W. K. Anderson (ed.), Methodism, (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1947), p. 115.

⁸⁶Robert E. Chiles, "Methodist Apostasy: From Free Grace to Free Will," Religion in Life, XXVII (1957-58), p. 439.

⁸⁷Works, VII, 373.

When Wesley avers that grace is free for all he exempts no one; when he states that grace is free in all he means prevenient grace. "Something of this (prevenient grace) is found in every human heart, passing sentence concerning good and evil, not only in all Christians, but in all Mohametans, all Pagans, yea, the vilest of savages."⁸⁸

Through his concept of prevenient grace Wesley found a way to assure the divine initiative and sovereignty in man's salvation. This grace triumphs over the corruption of nature so that there remains a continuity between God and man, "from God's side."⁸⁹ An important function for prevenient grace is "to ensure that the total corruption of nature does not lead to the unjust reprobation of any man. All men are responsible in some degree for their actions -- but this is not by nature but rather by a measure of grace which is given to all men."⁹⁰

In our consideration of the Christological pre-suppositions fundamental to prevenient grace we saw that Wesley did affirm a proleptic extension of the grace of Christ to pre-Christian man. In this sense at least he did recognize the possibility of an "implicit Christianity." For Wesley the ground for this possibility is the presence in all men of the prevenient

⁸⁸Ibid., 345.

⁸⁹Cushman, op. cit., p. 109.

⁹⁰Donal Dorr, "Total Corruption in the Wesleyan Tradition," The Irish Theological Quarterly, XXXI (1964), p. 311.

grace of Christ. It would be anachronistic, however, to expect to find the notion of an "implicit Christianity" fully developed in Wesley; for his ordinary, everyday experience prevenient grace only "becomes triumphant in justifying grace"⁹¹ when a man responds in faith to the preaching of the gospel. At the same time Wesleyan scholars do see in Wesley's writings an admission of the possibility of "extrascriptural salvation."

* William Cannon holds that because of prevenient grace every man has "latent within him a tendency toward salvation, or, even more accurately, a possibility of salvation."⁹² Colin Williams claims that Wesley "is prepared to accept the logic of his own viewpoint (the presence of prevenient grace in all men);"⁹³ Christ works in those who never hear the gospel, and they will be judged according to their response to this grace.⁹⁴ Lycurgus Starkey sees the possibility of extrascriptural salvation as implicit in Wesley's writings; prevenient grace which is "redemptive in its intent" in leading man forward and upward toward justification can be the work of the "hidden Christ."⁹⁵ Starkey, however, finds this notion inconsistent with Wesley's "major

⁹¹Cushman, op. cit., p. 111.

⁹²Cannon, op. cit., p. 137.

⁹³Williams, op. cit., p. 45.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 45.

⁹⁵Starkey, op. cit., p. 43.

emphasis upon the atoning work of Christ." For Starkey it seems that "true scriptural religion" demands explicit knowledge and acceptance of Christ.⁹⁶

In a letter to a convert to Quakerism concerning the differences between Quakerism and Christianity Wesley quotes an account of Quakerism by a Robert Barclay and, point by point, he indicates what elements of Quakerism are in agreement or disagreement with Christianity. One point of agreement is the possibility of an "implicit Christian":

The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of his death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of his death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer his grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy.⁹⁷

Again, we must remember that the experience of religious pluralism was not at all as acute for Wesley's day as it is for us in the twentieth century. In his preaching of the gospel Wesley concentrated on those who had forfeited the state of grace -- those who had lost their baptismal regeneration.⁹⁸ While the forces at work in the eighteenth century were definitely creating the "modern world," it is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that Western man has come to experience the "post-Christian era."

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁷Works, X, 178-9.

⁹⁸Lindström, op. cit., p. 107.

2. Karl Rahner and the "supernatural existential":

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

We begin again with a brief description of the intellectual background -- this time, of Karl Rahner. This examination of background precedes our description of context because the former is obviously more fundamental than the precise historical problem or situation which elicits the development of an original contribution.

As we shall see, the "supernatural existential" is a fundamental notion for Rahner's elaboration of his theological anthropology. The background for the development of this notion can be conveniently characterized as "remote" and "proximate" with the latter of course dependent on the former. The proximate background for the formulation of the thesis of the supernatural existential is Rahner's own transcendental-anthropological methodology; but, this methodology itself cannot be adequately understood without some awareness of the prior philosophical studies which made it possible. Remotely, then, the supernatural existential finds its background in Rahner's philosophical investigations of Thomism in light of the interpretation of Marechal who in turn had employed the methodology of Kant in ascertaining the a priori conditions for the possibility of human knowledge. Another important influence on the evolution of Rahner's methodology is that of Martin Heidegger. In capsule

form consonant with the purposes of this study we will trace the background to Rahner's thought.

In an attempt to achieve a balanced position between the extremes of empiricism (as evidenced in Hume) and rationalism (as evidenced in the theology of Wolff) Immanuel Kant wrote his Critique of Pure Reason. In the completed opus the balance is achieved but only at the expense of imposing rigid restrictions on human intellectual possibilities. Kant's epistemological conclusions can be summarized as follows: "Reality can be 'known' only so far as we can (a) come into firsthand intuitive contact with it, and (b) rationally apprehend and interpret what such intuition yields."⁹⁹ Thus, Kant's critique of the knowing process lead to the conclusion that through our faculties of sense and reason we can know only the "phenomenal." However, Kant does posit a corrective for the extreme empirical position "that this phenomenal world of ours is the whole of reality."¹⁰⁰ While "non-phenomenal" reality cannot be known by "pure reason," Kant "insists upon the possibility, suggested to us by our reason, of an ultimate or 'noumenal' reality, so constituted that mortal men cannot apprehend it through sensuous intuition or even grasp its essential structure through reason."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers; Harper Torchbacks, 1960); from the Introduction by Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson, p.xxxviii.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. xxxix.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. xxxix.

In his analysis of the "starting point of metaphysics" John Maréchal developed a metaphysics of knowledge by employing the method of Kant. Agreeing with Kant that each judgment expresses a synthesis of sense data, Maréchal claims that Kant has not gone far enough. For Maréchal, "this synthesis is not purely 'categorical' in the Kantian sense, i.e., it is not restricted to the universalization of conditions which are related to space and time."¹⁰² According to Maréchal, then, the basic error of Kant is the acceptance of "only the pure synthesis of what is empirically given in the activity of the mind."¹⁰³ Maréchal, on the other hand, maintains that "the human intellect is, at one and the same time, an empirical faculty and a possibility of the absolute," even though "the author of the Critique of Pure Reason could not fully grasp this second point."¹⁰⁴

By accepting "the analysis of the orientation toward the absolute in the affirmation of every judgment" Karl Rahner follows this "central and critical point of Maréchal's evaluation of Kant."¹⁰⁵ However, there are clear differences between the Rahnerian and the Marechalian interpretations of Kant, and

¹⁰²Otto Muck, The Transcendental Method (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 40.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 40, as quoted from Maréchal.

¹⁰⁵Karl Rahner, Spirit in the World, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968); from the Introduction by Francis P. Fiorenza, p. xxxvii; cf. fn. 26.

these differences can, in part at least, be accounted for through the influence of Heidegger on Rahner.¹⁰⁶

Rahner follows Heidegger in raising the fundamental question of being in terms of man himself; for "this be-ing is the be-ing that can question itself about its own being."¹⁰⁷

For Rahner, man questions being because there is already an a priori knowledge of being given in human knowledge; man cannot question what is "absolutely unknown and completely unknowable."¹⁰⁸

But this brings out the paradoxical nature of this first starting point of all meta-physical enquiry. It cannot be said in one word where this question begins. It takes its departure from nothing, insofar as it already comprehends the whole in order to start out on its way; in order to be the one who asks about being in its totality, man is already at the goal when he begins, since he must already know of being in its totality if he asks about it; and at the same time he confesses by his question that he himself is not the goal, but a finite man. This gives the starting point of metaphysics a peculiar duality and a unity at once: the starting point is questioning man, who as such is already with being in its totality. This starting point of metaphysics is also its limit, because this starting point is a question, and no answer reaches out beyond the horizon which the question has already set as a limit beforehand.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. xli.

¹⁰⁷Joseph Kockelmans, Martin Heidegger: A First Introduction to his Philosophy (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 14 (*italics his*).

¹⁰⁸Rahner, op. cit., p. xlii.

¹⁰⁹Rahner, Ibid., pp. 60-1.

Rahner sees man in his knowing and willing as a being of absolute and unlimited transcendence. Man's spiritual nature as that which is directed to absolute being is the a priori condition for the possibility for all conceptual, objective knowledge. Given with the nature of the human spirit is always a non-thematic, non-objective, non-conceptualized knowledge of God as the "Whither" of its transcendence.¹¹⁰ "This fundamentally non-objective knowledge of God as the principle of knowledge and reality is central to Rahner's whole theology."¹¹¹ In the light of this principle he has developed his transcendental anthropological methodology:

If man is, as a result of his transcendence, a nature always "eccentric" towards God, and is as a result the possible being-other of God (Christologically and anthropologically understood as formally two aspects of the same reality), then the comprehensive locus of all theology is anthropology. . . . If man is seen as the entrance of all reality, because he, as subject of knowledge cannot simply be a thing among other things, which could also be made the object of the question, but is rather also included in every statement about any object, then there is need of producing a transcendental horizon in man's supernaturally finalized nature and his history for every a posteriori theology, since one is asking about the necessary conditions of the possibility of his knowledge and activity.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," Theological Investigations, IV, p. 50.

¹¹¹Rahner, Spirit in the World, p. xliv.

¹¹²Rahner, "Grundsätzliche Überlegungen zur Anthropologie und Protologie im Rahmen der Theologie," in Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, Mysterium Salutis 2 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), p.406.

To explain "man's supernaturally finalized nature," i.e., what happens in man when the "holy mystery no longer manifests itself as a distant aloofness" (as the condition of the possibility of knowledge of categorized objects) but rather becomes "the grace of the nearness of the abiding mystery,"¹¹³ Rahner constructs his notion of the supernatural existential.

Rahner has continued this dialogue (with modern philosophy) insofar as he has used the insights of modern existential philosophy to explain this transcendental orientation to God in terms of a "supernatural existential." Man's orientation to God is not an abstract or "natural" openness to God, but is the result of God's historical calling of man to himself in Christ and thereby constituting the historical nature of man.¹¹⁴

To ascertain the context for Rahner's development of the theology of the supernatural existential we can begin with his own one-word description of what he calls the "standard" Catholic theology of grace -- "extrinsicism."¹¹⁵ Post-Tridentine theology had arrived at a conception of the relationship between nature and grace in which the latter might be described as

. . . a sort of second story carefully placed on top of lower nature by the heavenly Architect, in such a way that the ground floor is kept as far as possible intact and just as it

¹¹³Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," Theological Investigations, IV, p. 56.

¹¹⁴Rahner, Spirit in the World, p. xlv.

¹¹⁵Rahner, Nature and Grace, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), p. 114.

is in itself, serving in fact merely as a sort of base for the upper story; so that you can live in either of them without its mattering to whichever is, for the time being, the other one.¹¹⁶

Behind this point of view is the opinion that the "elevation" of man's soul and its faculties with their consequent acts through grace is realized on the ontological level but not on the psychological. In other words, there is no consciousness or experience of grace (its presence is known only by faith), since what we experience of ourselves is the "natural" only (except in extraordinary cases of mystics, etc.). Perhaps, as Rahner mentions, this conception of grace as a superstructure above man's conscious spiritual and moral life is a cause of the "modern lack of interest in the supernatural."¹¹⁷

Again, this "standard" notion of the relationship between nature and grace contains a kind of nominalism whereby a lack of grace is considered a deprivation only because of an external decree of God which "demands the possession of grace."¹¹⁸ This is an extremely juridical approach to man's personal appropriation of the grace gained for him through the merits of Christ in the "objective redemption." Is man born "graceless" -- in contact with the supernatural benefits of redemption only through

¹¹⁶Rahner, The Christian Commitment, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), p. 40-1.

¹¹⁷Nature and Grace, p. 119.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 117.

the divine decree which only really becomes actualized in his case with the first actual grace leading him to a salutary act? Or, as Rahner claims: "On the contrary, must not what God decrees for man be eo ipso an interior ontological constituent of his concrete quiddity 'terminative', even if it is not a constituent of his 'nature'?"¹¹⁹

Rahner points out the reasons why contemporary theology questions the adequacy of this "standard" view on nature and grace.¹²⁰ First of all, there is the effect of Marechal on scholastic philosophy. In the light of his interpretation of St. Thomas' desiderium naturale visionis beatificae theologians began to realize that "the orientation of man as a spirit towards God is not an 'extra', but it is what makes him what he experiences himself to be and he cannot finally deny and repress it without sin, because it is affirmed (even if only as an implicit, transcendental a priori) in every act of his spirit."¹²¹

A second reason for contemporary theological reassessment in this area is the enlightening results of studies in the history of theology especially in the medieval and Tridentine eras. "When we realize the special nature of the history of thought on a subject, . . . our historical study not only shows

¹¹⁹Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," Theological Investigations, I, p. 302.

¹²⁰Nature and Grace, p. 119ff.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 120.

us how we arrived at the final form of modern theology, but enables us to rediscover the intentions and preoccupations of earlier theologians which have been forgotten in modern textbook theology . . . "122

The Catholic-Protestant dialogue is a third reason for the present re-evaluation of nature-grace theology. "We must see Christ as the center of the whole existing world and economy of salvation; we must show that the supernaturalness of grace does not mean that man in his 'natural' being is a closed system complete in itself with grace as a pure superstructure which leaves what is beneath unchanged; . . . "123

Finally, the re-study of the nature-grace problem has been stimulated by the exigencies of the modern mentality. The contemporary world wants a "single complete picture of man" -- a synthetic picture of man today who thinks "existentially" and who wants to "experience" the reality of grace in his own existence where he experiences himself.¹²⁴

THE NATURE OF RAHNER'S SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

We have seen the philosophical background and the contemporary theological context out of which Rahner has developed his distinctive notion of the supernatural existential.

¹²²Ibid., p. 121-2.

¹²³Ibid., p. 123.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 124.

Now we turn to the question of the precise nature of the supernatural existential together with the arguments Rahner proffers in support of his thesis.

As introductory to this section, a few words on the meaning of the word "existential" are in order. The term is from Heidegger who explains its usage in his book, Sein und Zeit (1927; E.T.: Being and Time, 1962).

The question (of the ontological structure of existence) aims at displaying what constitutes existence. We give the name of existentiality to the interconnection of these structures.¹²⁵

Because the (ontological characteristics of beings) are determined by existentiality, we call these characteristics existentials. They must be sharply distinguished from what we call categories, which are the determinations of beings insofar as they are not related to existence.¹²⁶

The question of existence can only be clarified by existing. The self-understanding which leads to this we call existentiell . . . The interconnection of the structures (which constitute existence) we call existentiality. Their analysis is in the nature of an existential understanding, not an existentiell one.¹²⁷

The traditional view of the relationship between nature and grace was articulated in terms of seeing the former as potentia obedientialis for the latter. Precisely interpreted, this concept

¹²⁵ Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 12 as quoted in Sacramentum Mundi, 2, p. 304.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 14, in SM, p. 304.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 12, in SM, p. 304.

considers human nature in light of its spiritual dimension (knowing and willing) as "potentially obedient" to the possibility that God will to supernaturalize this nature through the bestowal of grace (ordinarily conceived of as "created" grace). In other words, there is no repugnance in the notion of human nature as recipient of grace should God will to give the latter. Obviously, this approach to the nature-grace relationship is extremely negative; it merely points out the fact of non-repugnance or the absence of contradiction in the openness of nature to grace.

Rahner would replace this "standard" position with a more positive appraisal of nature as potentia obedientialis for grace. Conscious of the need to assure the special gratuity of grace (over and above the gratuity of creation), Rahner affirms that the openness of nature to grace is not adequately articulated in terms of mere non-repugnance. He maintains that there is good reason to hold that there is an inner, unconditional ordination of man to grace, provided that this unconditional ordination "be grasped as unexacted and supernatural."¹²⁸ This "supernatural existential" is thus not part of man's "nature" (which as a theological concept is precisely that which "contraposed to the supernatural" and "consequently, a remainder concept"¹²⁹), but the existential

¹²⁸"Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," Theo. Invest., I, p. 315.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 313.

condition of historical man because of God's free decision to give Himself in "radical proximity."¹³⁰ This ordination to grace -- this supernatural existential -- is itself gratuitous, for it "only allows grace to be unexacted when it itself is unexacted."¹³¹ Man's concrete quiddity, then, is distinguishable into the supernatural existential and his "nature." The latter is the "remainder when this inmost center (the supernatural existential) is subtracted from the substance of his concrete quiddity."¹³² Rahner does retain the concept of "pure nature" as meaningful and possible "even when the supernatural existential is thought of as lacking"¹³³ to protect the gratuity of grace. However, this hypothetical concept ("pure nature") exhausts its utility in performing this function -- important though it may be. Far more important is the theological understanding of historical man, the only real man, who exists as the "echo" to the divine call to salvation.

In support of this thesis Rahner avers that an absolute divine decree requires a term outside of God in the ontological order. This principle recalls St. Thomas' analysis of divine love, which, unlike human love which presupposes the goodness

¹³⁰"The Concept of Mystery. . .," Theo. Invest., IV, p.55-6.

¹³¹"Concerning the Relationship between . . ." Theo. Invest., I, p. 313.

¹³²Ibid., p. 313.

¹³³Ibid., p. 314.

of the beloved, is creative of the good in the beloved.¹³⁴ In line with this insight Rahner holds that this special act of divine love which summons man to the supernatural level must result in an interior ontological modification of human nature:

For an ontology which grasps the truth that man's concrete quiddity depends utterly on God, is not his binding disposition eo ipso not just a juridical decree of God but precisely what man is, hence not just an imperative proceeding from God but man's most inward depths? If God gives creation and man above all a supernatural end and this is first in intentione, then man (and the world) is by that very fact always and everywhere other in structure than he would be if he did not have this end, and hence other as well before he has reached this end partially (the grace which justifies) or wholly (the beatific vision).¹³⁵

While Rahner sees the above argument as "decisive . . . for the existence of the supernatural existential,"¹³⁶ he also claims as corroborative the fact that the supernatural existential is the only realistic explanation of the poena damni of hell. If the supernatural existential is man's "innermost depths," then the loss of God forever would consequently be experienced as the hopeless ontological frustration which the extrinsicist approach cannot articulate convincingly.¹³⁷

¹³⁴St. Thomas, Summa Theologica, I, q. 20, a. 2.

¹³⁵"Concerning the Relationship . . ." Theo. Invest., I, p. 302-3.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 312, fn. 1.

¹³⁷Ibid.

Rahner maintains that his thesis on the supernatural existential both makes better sense in explaining the complexity of human experience and, from the pastoral point of view, helps to overcome the religious schizophrenia resulting from identifying human experience with the "natural." The extrinsicist approach led to the conclusion that "man in his own experience of himself experiences himself as this pure nature."¹³⁸ The superstructure conception of grace took it for granted that the supernatural is beyond consciousness; and "if this is so, then it is not surprising . . . when a man takes very little interest in this mysterious superstructure of his being; this grace is not present where he is present to himself, in his immediate self-awareness."¹³⁹ Following the teaching of St. Thomas on supernatural formal object of the entitatively supernatural act, Rahner avers that man is conscious of grace even though not reflexively -- "the possibility of experiencing grace and the possibility of experiencing grace as grace are not the same thing."¹⁴⁰ If this is so, and if in the concrete order "nature" is a remainder-concept, then man's conscious life, man's experience of himself, must be a consciousness of his concrete quiddity, i.e., his historical condition which is always "graced" either by the supernatural existential or by its fulfillment in sanctifying grace.

¹³⁸Ibid., p. 299.

¹³⁹Nature and Grace, p. 117.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 118.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

The broad sweep of Rahner's theology is thoroughly Christocentric. Christology and anthropology are but two aspects of the one mystery of God's self-communication to His creature. The three strictly supernatural Christian mysteries -- the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Grace -- are really the "articulation of the one single mystery of God, being the radical form of his one comprehensive mysteriousness, since it has been revealed in Jesus Christ that the absolute and abiding mystery can exist not only in the guise of distant aloofness, but also as absolute proximity to us, through the divine self-communication."¹⁴¹

While the Trinity points to the "God-ward aspect" of the one mystery, the Incarnation and grace signify the "two absolute self-communications of God" to the other than He.¹⁴² But these two mysteries do not exist merely as parallels: the Incarnation both conditions and interprets the mystery of grace. It is because God willed to communicate Himself to the other in the highest possible way that the world itself was created. The eternal expression of God to Himself of Himself in the Logos grounds the possibility of creation:

The ontological possibility of creation can derive from and be based on the fact that God, the unoriginated, expresses himself in

¹⁴¹"The Concept of Mystery . . .," Theo. Invest., IV, p. 72.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 71.

himself and for himself and so constitutes the original, divine, distinction in God himself. And when this God utters himself as himself into the void, this expression speaks out the immanent Word . . .¹⁴³

Rahner thus interprets creation as the presupposition for grace, ultimately for the grace of the Incarnation (without, however, denying the proper autonomy of the created order).¹⁴⁴

Christology interprets anthropology. There can be no adequate definition of man without the revelation of Christ. Only in Christ does God reveal to man his own mystery -- that he is the "paradigm of a possible self-utterance" of God Himself:

We could now define man, within the framework of his supreme and darkest mystery, as that which ensues when God's self-utterance, his Word, is given out lovingly into the void of god-less nothing. Indeed, the Logos made man has been called the abbreviated Word of God. This abbreviation, this code-word for God is man, that is, the Son of Man and men, who exist ultimately because the Son of Man was to exist.¹⁴⁵

This Christological anthropology, then, infinitely broadens the notion of man as potentia obedientialis in his God-ward relation. Man is indeed finitum capax infiniti:

The incarnation of God is therefore the unique, supreme, case of the total actualization of human reality, which consists

¹⁴³"On the Theology of the Incarnation," Theo. Invest., IV, p. 115.

¹⁴⁴"Redemption within Creation," in The Christian Commitment, p. 38ff.

¹⁴⁵"On the Theology of the Incarnation," p. 116.

of the fact that man is in so far as he gives up himself. For what does the potentia obedientialis mean for the hypostatic union? . . . Correctly understood, it means that this potentia is not one potentiality along with other possibilities in the constituent elements of human nature: it is objectively identical with the essence of man.¹⁴⁶

It is obvious from what has been said above that the supernatural existential, which describes the historical condition of man, must be the initial benefit of the redemptive work of Christ. In fact, Rahner explicitly identifies the supernatural existential with "objective justification" (which is synonymous with "objective redemption");¹⁴⁷

Man is redeemed, and is permanently the object of God's saving care and offer of grace. He is under an absolute obligation to attain his supernatural goal. This situation, "objective justification" in contradistinction to its subjective application by sanctification, is all-inclusive and inescapably prior to man's free action, which it determines. It does not exist solely in the thoughts and intentions of God, but is an existential determination of man himself. As an objective consequence of God's universal salvific will, it of course supervenes through grace upon man's essence as "nature", but in the real order is never lacking to it.¹⁴⁸

In relating the supernatural existential to the grace of justification Rahner asks whether man's objective justifica-

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴⁷cf. Kung, op. cit., p. 232.

¹⁴⁸Sacramentum Mundi, 2, p. 306.

tion (the supernatural existential) might be identified with the supernatural grace of justification "insofar as it is offered 'simply' but 'permanently and really'."¹⁴⁹ He argues that this thesis need not contradict the position that justification is a process that takes place through actual grace. The idea of a mutual causality between the process of justification as resulting from the grace of justification is present in St. Thomas.¹⁵⁰ According to this approach actual grace can be considered (in terms of the actualization of the supernatural existential) as "the 'self-effectiveness' of the grace of justification."¹⁵¹

For Rahner the supernatural existential is central to his whole theology of grace wherein all of creation is seen within the context of redemption. No man is born graceless because the whole world is charged with the redemptive grace of Christ; this is the heart of the Christian mystery:

Prior to any subjective attitude, man is really different (from what he would be as mere creature and mere sinner), because redemption has taken place in Christ, because God loves him in Christ as long as he is on pilgrimage: so much so, that for all eternity, even in his damnation, man remains determined by this 'is'. . . . If we call this 'is' a supernatural existential we

¹⁴⁹Rahner, "Rechtfertigung," in LThK, 8, 1043.

¹⁵⁰St. Thomas, Summa, I, II, q. 113, a. 8, ad. 1.

¹⁵¹Rahner, LThK, 8, 1043.

could say: prior to any subjective appropriation of salvation, man is inwardly determined by a supernatural existential, which consists of the fact that Christ in his death 'justified' sinful man before the all-holy God. . . . This intrinsic ability . . . can be simply called the supernatural existential of being (objectively) redeemed or of being (objectively) justified.¹⁵²

THE UNIVERSAL SCOPE OF THE SUPERNATURAL EXISTENTIAL

Rahner sees the religious pluralism of the contemporary world (specifically, the non-Christian religions) as an acute problem for Christianity.¹⁵³ The reason for this concern is the fact that no other religion makes the absolute claims for itself as does Christianity. The universal salvific will of God is sincerely affirmed by the Christian faith, but that same faith maintains that salvation comes only from Christ, that no man can be saved without the grace of Christ. In several of his writings Rahner has addressed himself to this major problem of contemporary theology.

While Christianity is the absolute religion intended for all men, this has not always been the case. Only since the coming of Christ has Christianity been in intent the universal religion.¹⁵⁴ However, for each particular culture Christianity

¹⁵²"Controversial Theology on Justification," Theo. Invest., IV, p. 200.

¹⁵³"Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," Theo. Invest., V, p. 116.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 118.

only becomes the religion of absolute obligation when that culture comes "into real and historically powerful contact with Christianity."¹⁵⁵

In pre-Christian times there were most likely many "lawful" religions if the word "lawful" means here "an institutional religion whose 'use' by man at a certain period can be regarded as a positive mean of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation. . ."¹⁵⁶ Consequently, the uniqueness of the religion of the Old Testament is not based on any absolute claims but only on its role as preparatory for Christianity. The religion of Israel can thus be seen as a paradigm for understanding pre-Christian religions as institutions of grace despite the presence therein of many imperfect elements.

Rahner points out that pre-Christian religions exist even today to the extent that Christianity has not yet really become a vital force in every historical culture.¹⁵⁷ It would be incorrect then to regard them as institutionalizations of "natural religion." All men are born "objectively justified": all men have received the supernatural existential through which the grace of Christ is always at work to make the saving act of faith a real possibility.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

This genuine subjective possibility of reaching salvation, this universal scope of the supernatural existential leads Rahner to regard general salvation history (salvation history in the widest sense) as materially identical with the profane history of the world.¹⁵⁸

If this is so, then this supernatural elevation of man which is granted by God's universal saving purpose already has of itself the nature of a revelation . . . It is, therefore, absolutely legitimate to call it already a revelation, especially since it already communicates or offers in an ontologically real sense as 'grace' something which also ultimately constitutes the whole content of divine revelation contained in proper propositions and human concepts, viz. God and his eternal life itself which, as God's self-communication in grace and glory, is the salvation of men. If man accepts this his supernaturally elevated transcendence -- this supernatural horizon and hence this divine revelation in the self-communication of the one revealed -- then he exercises, even though as yet in a very unsystematic manner, what in a Christian sense can certainly be called faith.¹⁵⁹

Since this general salvation history takes place as such in anonymity, Rahner must explain not only how men can be anonymous theists but specifically how they can be anonymous Christians. For the only possible salvation for any man is through the grace of Christ. The question for Rahner is thus: "How does man's tendency to God, which is at times completely unexpressed, unthematic, while

¹⁵⁸"History of the World and Salvation History," Theo. Invest., V, p. 102-2.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 104.

yet always present in man's existence, how does this tendency include an ordering toward Jesus Christ, God become man?"¹⁶⁰

Rahner answers this question in terms of his Christological interpretation of the nature of man. Jesus Christ is the highest manifestation of the possibilities of man in relation to God's self-communication to the creature which is the goal of creation.

The believer understands then that this absolute height is not only an arbitrary addition to this reality; nor is it only an external, juridical claim on him by the will of God, but rather that this self-communication of God, offered to all and fulfilled in a maximum way in Christ, is actually the goal of creation; and -- since God's word and will effect what they say -- it stamps and determines the nature of man in a previous way to his free decision: it gives him a determination which we call a "supernatural existential."¹⁶¹

It follows that in man's experience of his transcendence -- however unexpressed or incomprehensible -- he already experiences the offer of grace as a supernatural existential. The explicit revelation of the Word of God in Christ would then be not something coming from the outside as completely foreign, but precisely that which is unthematically experienced in the limitless openness of human experience. "The

¹⁶⁰"Die anonymen Christen," Schriften zur Theologie, VI, p. 548.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 549.

expressly Christian revelation becomes a reflex declaration of grace-filled revelation which man already experiences unreflectively in the depths of his being."¹⁶²

When man accepts this revelation he makes the act of faith, but he can implicitly make this act of faith by a complete acceptance of himself because revelation already speaks in him. "In the acceptance of himself man accepts Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement toward God through grace . . ."¹⁶³

Not every man can be called an anonymous Christian. But "he who lets himself be moved by this^g grace can very definitely be called an anonymous Christian."¹⁶⁴

Thus we have seen that for Rahner the supernatural existential is the real subjective result in every man of the redemption realized in Christ. Through this notion Rahner has been able to work out his theology of the anonymous Christian which offers us one of the best contemporary explanations of not only the universal salvific will of God but also of the role of Christ, the universal Savior.

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 549.

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 550.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 550.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between the Wesleyan and the Rahnerian theologies of grace -- specifically in terms of Wesley's notion of prevenient grace and Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential. The procedure elaborated in Chapter V was intended to bring out any possible similarities by asking the same questions to each position. The results point to an overall positive conclusion of a significant measure of agreement between the two. The following conclusions are formulated to summarize what was discovered:

(1) Our study of the theologies of which both Wesley and Rahner developed their respective theologies inevitably brought out the differences between them in this regard. Not much similarity was found between the eighteenth century itinerant preacher of the Anglican Church and the twentieth century speculative theologian of the Roman Church. However, what they did have in common -- the traditional doctrinal heritage of Christianity -- was sufficient ground for their common faith and even for common theological articulations of that faith.

CONCLUSIONS

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(1) Our study of the background and context out of which both Wesley and Rahner developed their distinctive theologies inevitably brought out the differences between them. In this regard not much similarity was to be expected between the eighteenth century itinerant preacher of the Anglican Church and the twentieth century speculative theologian of the Roman Church. However, what they did have in common -- the traditional doctrinal heritage of Christianity -- was sufficient ground for their common faith and even for common theological articulations of that faith.

(2) Wesley's notion of prevenient grace is very close in its meaning to Rahner's supernatural existential. Both of these concepts say basically the same thing about the given condition of homo religiosus from the Christian point of view -- no man is born without being affected from the beginning by the grace of God in Christ. For Wesley, no man is merely in a "natural" state. By "natural" he means the condition of "total corruption" which is the result of original sin. For Rahner, no man is merely "natural" or merely sinful. By "natural" he means the philosophically abstract nature of man which in the theological sense is only a "remainder" concept. These semantic differences can be resolved if we remember that Wesley refused to speak of man in the abstract; to prescind from grace is to speak of sinful man. Rahner, on the other hand, distinguishes between man as nature (or creature) and man as sinner to protect the special gratuity of the supernatural gift of grace. But Rahner also denies that man is ever just a sinner. In other words, both Wesley and Rahner come to the same conclusion that no man is ever totally without grace; the difference between them is that Wesley identifies the "natural" state of man with his sinful condition, whereas Rahner maintains that there is some utility in affirming another distinction, i.e., between man as sinner and man as man.

For both Wesley and Rahner historical man is the center of concern, and both of them say essentially the same thing about man, i.e., he is what he is because of the grace of Christ (either "prevenient grace" or the "supernatural existential"). For both, this preliminary benefit of the redemption finds its fulfillment in the grace of justification of which it is the beginning.

(3) Both Wesley and Rahner ground their notions of the initial gift of grace in the redemptive work of Christ. By widening the perspective of redemption to include creation both of them see a continuity between the two "orders" which they articulate, respectively, in terms of prevenient grace and the supernatural existential. While Wesley sees Christ as always salvifically engaged through his emphasis on the divine nature of the eternal Son of God, Rahner views all of creation as the presupposition of God's ultimate self-communication to man in Christ. For Wesley the prevenient grace of Christ restrains the ultimate destructive force of sin which of itself totally corrupts man. For Rahner the supernatural existential is man's subjective assurance that he has been saved from sin through the death of Christ.

(4) Wesley and Rahner are both concerned with the need for a realistic theological explanation for the universal salvific will of God. Wesley can hold against Calvin that God's grace is free for all men through his theology of prevenient grace which is free in all men. The presence of this grace in all men supports the real possibility of "extrascriptural" salvation or "implicit" Christianity. While Wesley does refer to the proleptic extension of the grace of Christ to pre-Christian man, he does not develop this line of thought precisely because it was not a pressing pastoral problem. Rahner, on the other hand, sees the supernatural existential as the ontological effect in man of God's universal will of salvation in and through Christ. This supernatural existential is not only the real possibility for every man to be an "anonymous theist" but even more, to be an "anonymous Christian." Christology interprets anthropology in the sense that a man's total self-acceptance can really be the silent acceptance of Christ in (implicit) faith. God communicates Himself to all men because He created all for his unique self-communication to one man, Jesus of Nazareth.

(5) Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential are fundamental features of the broad sweep of their theologies of grace. The common intuition

that unites them is the paramount significance of the role of Christ (for Wesley, the "Pre-supposed Christ"; for Rahner, an explicit Christocentrism). The Breadth of their common vision of God's love for man is sufficient support for the fact that no theology of grace can stand outside of a Christological context.

As the words of a contemporary Methodist Bishop were a most apposite preface to this dissertation, the words of his late Catholic colleague, Augustin Cardinal Bea, form its fitting conclusion:

We can be sure that this "Letter" (of John Wesley) is not asking any of us to sidestep or to softpedal our religious differences but only to see them in proper perspective. These differences of course, in so far as they constitute real obstacles to true Church unity, must eventually be overcome; and modern ecumenism sees this happy end achieved by the painful process of confessional reform and also by the inter-confessional dialogue which our author adumbrates in the words: "Come, my brother, and let us reason together."

(M. Hurley, ed. John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic, p. 19.)

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